

Kevin Vallely on the Sandakan
Death March, one of the Second
World War's worst atrocities

ISSUES &

FRIDAY ZEITGEIST



MARNI SOUPCOFF

Here are some of the more intriguing entries in the current instalment of Google's Zeitgeist, an index that tracks the popularity of searches fielded by the Internet's leading search engine.

Google

Gaining search queries:
week ending August 14

1. Segolene Royal
2. tsa
3. Shanna Moakler
4. Lieberman
5. Ahmadinejad
6. kinkajou
7. meteor shower
8. Maurice Clarett
9. Heather Mills
10. Travis Barker
11. Channing Tatum
12. step up
13. windows update
14. Mike Douglas
15. mythbusters

Ségolène Royal They say that politicians are a lot like ugly movie stars — they've got big egos and lots of attitude, but they tend not to be very easy on the eyes. Socialist French presidential contender Ségolène Royal is a rare exception to this general rule. In the French edition of *FHM*, a men's magazine, Royal was recently rated the 6th sexiest woman in the world ... ahead of much younger stars such as Penelope Cruz.

Of course, the politician and mother of four is more than just a pretty face. She has been a cabinet minister in the past, and recent polls have her pegged as the top Socialist Party candidate ... ahead even of her

domestic partner and fellow potential candidate François Hollande, who is the head of the Party. Royal has come under some fire from



then released. No word on whether Baby Luv was punished for the misdeed, but the animal was apparently looked over by a veterinarian the next day. Perhaps the anxious kinkajou was concerned about catching something from Ms. Hilton.

Maurice Clarett Did we really need a second troubled football player to make news with a police chase? Most would probably have been content to leave it with O.J. and his famous pre-trial run in the Bronco. But last week former Ohio State running back Maurice Clarett was arrested for leading police on a pursuit that ended only when officers spiked the tires of Clarett's SUV. Police say they then discovered a hatch-

et, four loaded guns and an open bottle of vodka in Clarett's vehicle. They claim they had to use pepper spray to get the athlete



ILLUSTRATION BY IAN WRIGHT

Borneo's 'green cage'

KEVIN VALLELY

On August 15, 1945 — 61 years ago this week — Private John Skinner awoke to discover he was the only prisoner left alive at Camp Sandakan, Borneo. His companion Walter Hancock died



camp that morning before they too succumbed. The reason anyone made it to Paginatan at all was thanks to the locals who would occasionally come out of the jungle to give them tapioca and sweet potato.

The next leg of the marchers' journey took them to Tavio hill, a notoriously difficult section of the trail and the final resting place for

renow socialists for her law-and-order attitude. But the slight shift to the right might be what her party needs to be competitive in the country's presidential election.

Shanna Moakler Last week, former Blink 182 drummer Travis Barker filed for divorce from his wife, former

Miss U.S.A. Shanna Moakler. The couple and their children are well-known to many from their reality show, *Meet the Barkers*, as well as from Travis's music career.

One of the uglier parts of the split are the rumours that Moakler was unfaithful to Barker during their marriage — a charge that Moakler denies and Barker says is true. In her defence, Moakler released a statement, declaring, "I still happen to be very much in love with Travis, and his using the media to take low blows at me isn't just embarrassing, it's hurtful." The two have also pleaded their respective cases on their respective MySpace Web pages, though Barker's post has now been removed. I suppose this is how modern young couples break up.

Kinkajou The kinkajou is a raccoon-like animal that has been made trendy by heiress Paris Hilton, who has a pet one she calls Baby Luv. Perhaps in revenge for the horrible choice of name, Baby Luv recently bit Hilton while the two were playing at their home in Hollywood. Hilton was driven to a hospital emergency room, where she was treated and given a tetanus shot,



Maurice Clarett

under control — their stun guns wouldn't work because Clarett was wearing Kevlar body armor.

This is not the first time Clarett has had trouble with the law. He was due to go to trial this coming Monday on armed robbery charges after he allegedly held up two people outside a bar

last New Year's Day. (The trial has now been delayed due to Judge David Fais's order that Clarett first undergo a mental health evaluation due to the circumstances of his latest arrest.) Before that, Clarett had been charged with filing a false police report.

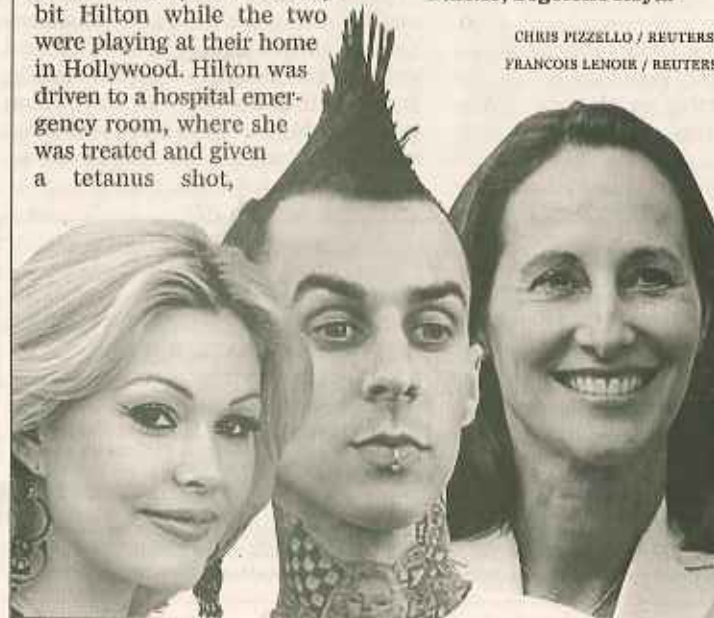
Many sports fans are disappointed by Clarett's failure to realize his potential. He was expected to become a star NFL player, but has not played a single football game since scoring the winning touchdown that gave Ohio State the national title in January, 2003.

Clarett now faces a US\$5-million bond, which is to say he is likely to remain behind bars for the foreseeable future. A Clarett comeback is looking less likely than ever before.

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From left, Shanna Moakler and husband Travis Barker; Ségolène Royal

CHRIS PIZZELLO / REUTERS;
FRANCOIS LENOIR / REUTERS



alone in a place so terrible to him that death would be a welcome relief.

I try to imagine his feelings of fear and loneliness on that fateful morning when he finds himself all alone; his memories of family and friends back home in Tenterfield, New South Wales; the awareness that three years earlier 2,434 Australian and British troops were incarcerated by the Japanese Imperial Army at this remote jungle outpost in Northeastern Borneo; and now the realization that, of the remaining prisoners, he's the only one left alive.

It's just after 7:00 a.m. when Skinner is roused from his makeshift bed and marched outside the camp perimeter and up a dirt slope to a slit trench. He is blindfolded and forced to his knees. Then, in one powerful swipe, Sergeant-Major Murozumi slices his sword down upon Skinner's neck. His life is ended. Just five hours later, Emperor Hirohito's crackling radio broadcast is beamed around the world. Japan has surrendered: The war is over.

Borneo: The mysterious cloud-covered island of impenetrable jungle where the spirits of head hunters still roam, bats the size of seagulls guard the night sky, and prehistoric man-eating crocodiles abound. At over 130-million years old, Borneo's rainforest is among the most ancient and diverse in the world, home to a myriad of natural riches. The island is only one of two places on earth where orangutans live wild, is home to over 2,000 types of trees, 600 species of bird, and over 200 types of mammals, including 44 that are unique to the island. Darwin described it perfectly as "one great untidy luxuriant hothouse made by nature for herself"

Recently, while casually surfing information about the region, I stumbled upon the shocking tale of what played out in the jungles of North Borneo during the Second World War.

It began in 1942, after Singapore and Borneo had fallen to the Japanese Imperial Army; a POW camp was established just outside the port city of Sandakan on the Northeastern coast of British North Borneo (the region presently known as Sabah) to intern over 2,400 British and Australian troops.

As the war's momentum had shifted by early 1945, and anticipating an imminent Allied inva-



COURTESY OF LYNETTE SILVER

From left, Nelson Short, Bill Sticpewich and Keith Botterill

sion, the Japanese began moving the bulk of their forces overland to the west coast of the island, using the prisoners to hump their supplies. Orders from Tokyo had been explicit: "It is the aim not to allow the escape of a single one, to annihilate them all, and not to leave any traces."

The command had ruled the prisoners had to die, and the Japanese army decided they would die with a purpose — as pack mules. Over the following six months, the last six months of the war, sick and emaciated POWs were force-marched — some as far as 250 km — in three

separately to Borneo, scouring military archives from Australia to Japan, delving into anything associated with the march. Without her labours, much of what happened would remain a mystery.

Richard Murray was selected for the first march by the Japanese. Joining him was Keith Botterill, his brother-in-arms. The two had met on the day of their enlistment, and had stayed close ever since. Through the fighting and the defeat in Singapore, the tortuous ocean voyage to Sandakan, and in the hell of the POW camp, the pair had been in-

Tokyo ruled the prisoners of Borneo had to die. The Japanese army decided they would die with a purpose

separate groups through dense, primary jungle to the village of Ranau on the flanks of Mt. Kinabalu, Southeast Asia's tallest mountain. The track they followed would have severely challenged even the fittest soldier, but for men beaten down by disease, starvation and torture, it was a near impossible task. Anyone unable to keep up was executed. So the blood-letting began.

The Sandakan Death March went down in infamy as arguably the worst atrocity ever suffered by Australian soldiers, but it remains largely invisible on the historical map. The details of the event were so shocking that it was easier for the Australian government to withhold information than go public. It is only in the last few years that the story has come to light, thanks to the unlikely figure of Australian Lynette Silver, a 61-year-old grandmother and author of *Sandakan: A Conspiracy of Silence*, who has made it her mission to tell the world about the tragedy.

Since the early 1990s, this former schoolteacher has immersed herself in the story, travelling fre-

separable. That they would be together on the march was a great relief to both. They set off at dawn on January 31 with hopes of something better.

The early days of the trek proved tough but bearable. But everything changed when the group reached Boto on day 12. The deeper they pressed into the jungle, the leaner the Japanese resupply drops along the route. When the prisoners arrived at Boto, they were presented with nothing more than six cucumbers and a sprinkling of rice.

When the group realized they had to continue on to Paginatan without food, it broke them. Murray recognized the seriousness of the situation and positioned himself at the back of the group so he could assist the stragglers. Despite his efforts, the men began to die. Ambulance man Arthur Noakes died at 8 a.m. on the second morning out of Boto, while David Humphries and Donald Palmer, unable to continue, were shot dead one hour later. Lawrence McLeenan and Norman McLeod made it a few kilometres beyond

a number of the Sandakan marchers. Reconnaissance teams in 1946 felt this section was too difficult for their recovery efforts, and never searched it, leaving behind the remains of an unknown number of dead.

The POWs called the jungle "a green cage," and you can see why. Surrounded by an impenetrable web of vegetation, trekkers are hooked and grabbed, scraped and poked, as they struggle to find their way through.

By the middle of May 1945, less than four months after 452 POWs started on the first march from Sandakan to Ranau, only 30 were left alive. Botterill and Murray knew it was now or never. They managed to steal a 20 kg bag of rice from a Japanese store and were heading for escape when their theft was discovered. The 30 men were paraded out and lined up. Stealing rice was a capital offence for the Japanese and the men readied themselves for execution. No one said a word.

Then Richard Murray quietly stepped forward and admitted the crime, sparing the others.

The horrors of Sandakan and the death march still defy description. Prisoners were beaten and tortured, even castrated and crucified. In Paginatan, along the march route, something more unimaginable occurred: Local people describe how hungry Japanese soldiers culled prisoners from the group, cut off their arms and legs and brought the torsos to their camp for consumption.

And yet, some prisoners did manage to survive this hell.

After Richard Murray's death, Keith Botterill withdrew into himself but remained committed to an escape. On the evening of July 7, he and some companions disappeared into the jungle. Six weeks later they would be rescued. Bill Moxham, Nelson Short, Bill Sticpewich, Owen Campbell, Dick Braithwaite and Botterill survived Sandakan. No one else did.



Kevin Valley is Outpost Magazine's Editor-at-Large. You can read Kevin Valley's full story of The

Sandakan Death March in the July/August 2006 issue of Outpost magazine.