



## Our purpose

The Montevideo Maru Memorial Committee represents the interests of families of soldiers and civilians captured in Rabaul and the New Guinea Islands after the Japanese invasion in January 1942.

Many of these men are believed to have perished when the Montevideo Maru was torpedoed off the Philippines on 1 July 1942.

The purpose of the Committee is to gain national recognition and greater understanding of the tragedy and its context.

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## Friends of Montevideo Maru

Friends of Montevideo Maru support action to achieve greater national recognition and understanding of the events surrounding the fall of Rabaul and the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*.

If you know someone who wants to be a Friend and who would like to receive this newsletter, ask them to register at PO Box 1743, Neutral Bay 2089 or email [kjackson@jacksonwells.com.au](mailto:kjackson@jacksonwells.com.au)

During the month the number of Friends passed the 100 milestone and as of today stands at 104.

## Subic Bay boosts MvM recognition



The unveiling of a plaque at Subic Bay on Wednesday 1 July to honour the men of the *Montevideo Maru* marks a significant step in recognising this great Australian tragedy.

The small but eloquent ceremony at the scenic Hellships Memorial belied the blaze of media and political attention back in Australia.

Veterans' Affairs Minister Alan Griffin called for the

nation to pause and remember the 1053 Australian lives lost. "War brings many tragedies and today we remember one of the greatest tragedies of the Second World War," he said.

Shadow Minister Louise Markus thanked and acknowledged the men who "made the ultimate sacrifice for this nation, a sacrifice that has contributed to the peace we enjoy today", and Australia's Ambassador to the Philippines appended an eloquent footnote when he concluded his speech at Subic Bay with the words: "This tragedy is not forgotten. The families are not forgotten. These men are not forgotten. We honour them all."

TV coverage included segments on the main evening news bulletins of the ABC, SBS and Chennel 10. Broadcaster Alan Jones of 2UE was particularly supportive through his nationally syndicated radio program.

Press coverage of the issue was extensive with substantial articles in all major newspapers including *The Australian*, *Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Canberra Times* - as well as in many regional papers and on the internet.

Foxtel took the opportunity to announce it will screen John Schindler's two-part documentary, *The Tragedy of the Montevideo Maru*, later this year.

The Montevideo Maru Memorial Committee is now preparing a major submission for the Federal Government recommending how it can ensure the *Montevideo Maru* story is prominently and permanently honoured in Australia's national capital.

*Photo: MMMC's Phil Ainsworth and Hellships Memorial founder Randy Anderson examine the Montevideo Maru plaque against the backdrop of the scenic Subic Bay.*

## SPEECHES & STATEMENTS

### These men are honoured, and they are not forgotten

Extracts from the speech by ROD SMITH, Australia's Ambassador to the Philippines, made at the at Subic Bay memorial ceremony on 1 July 2009



At about a quarter past ten on the night of Tuesday 30 June 1942, the United States submarine *Sturgeon* patrolling northwest of Bojeador off Luzon sighted a darkened ship on a westerly course going at high speed.

The log of the submarine's captain, Lieutenant Commander WL Wright, tells the story: "Put on all engines and worked up to full power, proceeding to westward in attempt to get ahead of him. For an hour and a half we couldn't make a nickel. This fellow was really going, making at least 17 knots...

"Determined to hang on in the hope he would slow ... sure enough, about midnight he slowed to about 12 knots. After that it was easy... At 0225 fired four-torpedo spread, range 4000 yards. At 0229 heard and observed explosion about 75-100 feet abaft stack. At 0240 observed ship sink stern first. He was a big one.

"A few lights were observed on deck just after the explosion, but there was apparently no power available, and his bow was well up in the air in six minutes."

The ship was the *Montevideo Maru*. She carried 1,053 prisoners from the Australian Territory of New Guinea.

There were fathers and sons, civilians and troops, missionaries and traders, businessmen and administrators. They had all been captured and interned by the Japanese in Rabaul. They all died.

The youngest, the fifteen-year old, was Ivan Gascoigne, recorded as a clerk, the son of Cyril Gascoigne, who also died.

The sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* at 2.40 am on Wednesday 1 July 1942 was Australia's greatest disaster at sea, then and now. It remains one of our country's worst disasters.

I pay tribute today to all of you who have travelled so far to be present for this historic event in this special place. This tragedy is not forgotten. The families are not forgotten. These men are not forgotten. We honour them all.

### Remembering MvM: Our worst maritime disaster

On the 67th anniversary, Minister for Veterans' Affairs, ALAN GRIFFIN MP, called for the nation to pause and remember the 1053 Australian lives lost in the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*.



War brings many tragedies and today we remember one of the greatest tragedies of the Second World War.

On 1 July 1942, a United States submarine, USS *Sturgeon*, torpedoed and sank what it believed to be a Japanese merchant vessel. It was in fact the *Montevideo Maru*, carrying Australian prisoners of war (POWs) and civilians who were locked in the hold with no means of escape once the ship was struck.

On board were 1053 Australian prisoners of war and civilians who had been captured and held by the Japanese at Rabaul on the island of New Britain, in what is now known as Papua New Guinea.

The *Montevideo Maru* took 11 minutes to sink. No Australians survived. It was not until after the war that Australian authorities discovered the tragic fate of those captured at Rabaul.

The families and associations with connections to the *Montevideo Maru* have never lost sight of the tragedy that occurred 67 years ago. That some questions concerning the ship may never be answered must also add to their sense of loss. It is something that we as a nation should never forget.

## Opposition says government must search for MvM

**Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs LOUISE MARKUS MP** marked the memorial ceremony at Subic Bay by calling on the Federal Government to fund a search for the *Montevideo Maru*



The unveiling of a new plaque to commemorate Australian prisoners of war and civilians lost when the *Montevideo Maru* sank after being torpedoed off the Philippines in World War II is welcomed.

The sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* with the loss of 1053 Australian prisoners of war and civilians on 1 July 1942 is the greatest single tragedy in Australia's maritime history but more importantly it is one of our lesser known.

Those who perished had been previously captured and held by the Japanese at Rabaul on the Island of New Britain in what is now known as Papua New Guinea.

It is important to thank and acknowledge those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for this nation, a sacrifice that has contributed to the peace we enjoy today.

But there is still more to do for the families of these heroes. I urge the Australian Government to do everything that it can to locate the resting place of the *Montevideo Maru*.

In April 2008 a spokesperson for the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd said the Government would consider the idea of a fundraising appeal to find the ship.

In June 2009 my parliamentary colleague Steve Ciobo tabled a series of petitions on behalf of 1295 Australians calling on the Rudd Government to fund the search for the ship.

I call on the Government to respond so that families who lost their loved ones can have closure.



## Objectives

1. To secure national recognition of the Montevideo Maru tragedy.
2. To facilitate comfort and closure in the minds of the victims' relatives.
3. To locate the nominal roll brought back from Japan that was deposited with Central Army Records.
4. To stimulate action to provide greater knowledge of the events that led to Montevideo Maru tragedy including the Rabaul evacuation in January 1942.
5. To encourage action to ensure the story of the tragedy is a significant part of Australia's social history and to enhance knowledge in the community of the role of and sacrifices made by Australians in PNG.

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## Committee

Prof Kim Beazley AC  
Patron

Keith Jackson AM  
Chairman

Prof Hank Nelson  
Historical Adviser

Phil Ainsworth

John Cleary

Lindsay Cox

Chris Diercke

Rod Miller

Nils T Selvik

Albert Speer MBE

Aage Henning Stavenes

Hooky (Philip) Street

Liz Thurston

Clive Troy

Max Uechtritz

Andrea Williams

## PROF HANK NELSON

### Addressing some of the myths

**KEITH JACKSON** asked Emeritus Prof Hank Nelson to respond to some of the myths and issues surrounding Rabaul and the *Montevideo Maru*

#### **'The brief, closed inquiry into the surrender of Rabaul'**

Presumably this was the *'Inquiry into Japanese Landings at Rabaul, Timor and Ambon'*, copies of which are held in the Australian War Memorial. Blamey forwarded copies of the three volume report to the Minister on 29 July 1942, i.e. nearly a month after the sinking of the Montevideo Maru. That was not significant as the sinking was not then known.

The inquiry had to be closed since you did not disclose inquiries into military actions to the enemy. And it was not brief and it was not completed before the Montevideo Maru sailed. The attached documents and statements of 68 witnesses make it valuable for historians.

#### **'The post-war government's refusal to hold an inquiry'**

There are repeated statements by people of good intent about the government declining to hold an inquiry after the war. Sometimes the *Pacific Islands Monthly* is quoted ['Australian government will not inquire into Rabaul'].

In fact, if you go back to Chifley's speech on 28 June 1946, he said at the end of a rowdy debate that had covered many subjects that if it could be shown that men in command were guilty of 'corruption, dishonesty or treason' he would favour inquiries.

He referred to specific military failures - Dunkirk, Malaya, the Middle East - but not Rabaul. At the end of his speech, Menzies, then leader of the Opposition, said 'I personally agree with him'.

Introducing the debate, Anthony had mentioned the three incidents involving the 23rd Brigade - Timor, Ambon and Rabaul. Anthony spoke mostly about Ambon and Timor but he did include Rabaul at the end of his speech.

The Curtin government is often held responsible for the disaster of Rabaul, and Curtin as Prime Minister in January 1942 certainly had a responsibility for events occurring then.

But the Labor Government had nothing to fear from an inquiry. The Menzies and Fadden governments had made the decision to deploy the troops to Rabaul (and to other points where over 20,000 became prisoners) and Curtin inherited those decisions in October 1941. Menzies had been in power when other disasters such as Greece and Crete had taken place.

## New friends

### Graeme Hockey

We find the articles very interesting. My wife's grandfather Philip Coote and his brother in law Hugh Scott were on the ship.

### Greg Miles

I really appreciate the updates. My great uncle Bruce George Patterson [NX 36777 1st Independent Coy] was on the ship. It is extremely encouraging to see the interest generated in the story and possible search for the wreck.

### Kerry Brown

My great uncle Albert Carr was on board the ship when it was hit.

### Roderick Maclean

My father Sgt CI Maclean NGVR and grandfather CHR Maclean, a civilian, were lost on this vessel. I would very much like to become a Friend of Montevideo Maru.

### John Mansley

My uncle Private Frederick William Mansley [NX60075 AASC 8 Div Sup Col) was on the Montevideo Maru.

### Alan & John Bell

I read the article in the *North Shore Times*. Our grandfather James Leonard Ormond suffered the same fate as Andrea Williams' grandfather and great-uncle.

### Robyn Hanna

My family had a friend on the *Montevideo Maru*, Bruce Lorraine Dargin. We are so happy that at last someone is doing something about this mystery. Thank you so much for the work you are doing to try to come to the truth

## HANK NELSON (CONT)

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The War Cabinet papers are instructive. After the Japanese entered the war, the fate of the troops in Rabaul was reconsidered. The Chiefs of Staff advised that they should stay. They made this recommendation knowing that the invading force likely to be faced by Lark Force would be overwhelming and that Australia would be unable to strengthen or evacuate the troops.

They made this recommendation because Australia was then making strong pleas to the Dutch and the British to fight in the Netherlands East Indies and Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong and we wanted the Americans to fight in the Philippines and to deploy forces in Australia and in the southwest Pacific. We could hardly do this and withdraw our own troops.

Also we wanted to maintain a 'forward observation line' and wanted to force the Japanese to commit troops and materiel to an invasion force. It was not so much the time taken by the troops in Rabaul in resisting an attack that was important, but the fact that their presence meant that the Japanese had to bring together an extensive force of ships (including aircraft carriers, mine sweepers, submarines, troop carriers) and aircraft.

The chiefs of staff reported that they did not have the shipping to evacuate or escort Australian troops and they did not have the aircraft to protect the ships at sea. It is true but unlikely that the Curtin government could have over-ruled the chiefs of staff.

The Chiefs of Staff also advised that civilian government in Rabaul should continue. Obviously they did not want the troops diverted to maintaining martial law and they did not want chaos on the eve of an invasion. (Kieta was looted when the civilian government left and even on Misima and the Trobriands there was a break down in law and order.)

When the War Cabinet received Page's urgent request to evacuate non-essential government personnel, it was the Chiefs of Staff who made what turned out to be the disastrously slow recommendation to Page to send a list of the numbers involved. The Chiefs of Staff were more aware by 17 December that they could not supply ships or aircraft to secure passage of civilians from Rabaul. They knew that they would be taking a great risk in encouraging people to put to sea when the skies were dominated by the Japanese. In retrospect of course that risk was worth taking.

So the Curtin Government had inherited the policy of the dispersal of small forces to the north and it had acted in conformity with the best available advice. The arguments of the Chiefs of Staff were rational - even if you disagree with them. And you can read in the War Cabinet minutes Curtin asking the Chiefs of Staff for assurance that all possible was being done for the men in Rabaul. So the Labor government had little to fear from an inquiry.

## New friends

### Don Hook

My father Corporal Wally Hook, a member of the First Independent Company, was based at Kavieng with Lex Fraser. He was in Rabaul for medical treatment at the time of the Japanese invasion.

He and another commando, also in Rabaul for medical treatment, decided to go it alone. They walked for weeks before being picked up at Drina and taken to Port Moresby on the *Laurabada*.

My father, later sergeant, died in 1945 from injuries received in an accident. Lex is still going strong and is one of the very few survivors of the First.

### Annette Baggie

I read with interest the recent article in the *North Shore Times* about the *Montevideo Maru*. My late mother's first husband was one of the Australian servicemen on the ship after being captured in New Guinea: Gunner Keith Morden Smith [NX52916 AIF 17 A/Tk Bty Royal Australian Artillery].

If I can help in any way with your mission of a memorial for those onboard I'm happy to do so. I know my mother never received a death certificate at the time.

### Bob Williams

My uncle Sapper Francis Gordon Williams [TX4111 Fortress Engineers] was lost on the *Montevideo Maru*. He was from Lenah Valley in Hobart and aged 22.

It's great what you're doing and my family would very much like to be kept informed. Surely the time has come to find the *Montevideo Maru*.

## HANK NELSON (CONT)

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### 'The long official silence for many years'

The series of public statements made by the Government in September and October 1945 were in accord with what was known with reasonable certainty and issued as soon as possible.

The invasion of Rabaul and what happened to civilians is given fair coverage in the Australian Official Histories, particularly the two chapters in Wigmore: *The Japanese Thrust* [1957] and the chapter by Sweeting on civilians in Hasluck: *The Government and the People 1942-1945* [1970]. That total of 80 or more pages is still worth reading.

I know of no documents in which there is evidence of a government desire to silence discussion on Rabaul or to suppress information.

### 'Major Harold S Williams' urgent mission to Japan'

Australia sent many people overseas to investigate war crimes and look for missing Australians. We were of course concerned about the men who had been killed at Sandakan and on the march to Ranau. No 3 Australian Prisoner of War Contact and Inquiry group was sent there. The 23 Australian War Graves Unit was also in Borneo.

Albert Klestadt in his autobiography, *The Sea was Kind*, notes on page 207 that he spent 18 months in Japan in the immediate post-war 'part of the time as Investigating Officer, War Crimes'.

We had units set up to investigate what happened to the 8,000 missing Australians and to inquire into war crimes such as the Tol Massacre.

Here is why Harold Williams was sent to Japan. By mid September 1945, the Australians knew much about what had happened to the prisoners of war and the civilian internees in Rabaul. Gordon Thomas and the other civilians who had survived in Rabaul had made statements. Others who had survived in Rabaul had been questioned.

The Japanese officers in Rabaul had admitted that the prisoners had sailed on the *Montevideo Maru* and it had been sunk. This confirmed intelligence that the Australians had picked up during the war - from New Guineans who had been in Rabaul, from documents taken from the bodies of Japanese, from interrogation of Japanese prisoners, from civilians who escaped from or near Rabaul aided by coast watchers etc.

But the Australians had no confirming documents and no other confirmation that would justify a public statement.

On 26 September Frank Forde went as far as he reasonably could. He stated that 700-1,000 Australians had sailed from Rabaul for Hainan, had failed to reach their destination and the government had 'grave fears'.

## The Norwegian connection

The Montevideo Maru Memorial Committee has acquired two new members from Norway. Both men are committed to further investigating the story of the *Herstein* and the Norwegian sailors from its crew who died on the *Montevideo Maru*.

**NILS T SELVIK** was born in Bergen on 2 January 1931. He served in the Norwegian Brigade in Germany in 1950-51 and graduated from the law school of Oslo University in 1957. Nils served in the administration of several local councils and was CEO of Hordaland county council from 1976-89. He was a judge of the Gulating lagmannsrett (Western Norway Court of Appeal) from 1989-99. He is committed to

**AAGE HENNING STAVENES** was born in Voss on 27 August 1929. He served in the Norwegian Brigade in Germany in 1950 before attending mercantile school in 1952. Thereafter was a businessman in several areas including textiles and the automotive industry. In 1983 he established his own vehicle sales and repair business in Voss. He has for many years been chairman of the local club of veterans of the Norwegian Brigade and has a deep interest in the story of the *Herstein* and the Norwegian sailors who died on the *Montevideo Maru*.

## HANK NELSON (CONT)

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He was forced to make a statement as rumours were already circulating and the Rabaul officers who had survived imprisonment in Japan were about to arrive in Australia.

They would talk, and they knew that the other prisoners had sailed and they had picked up clues from the Japanese that those men had died at sea.

Harold Williams was already in the Philippines - as were other Australian personnel concerned with recovering Australians.

He was selected to go to Japan because he had lived in Japan since 1919, spoke Japanese and he knew his way around the Japanese bureaucracy.

He went to Japan knowing the name of the *Montevideo Maru*, when it sailed, where it was going and that it was sunk. His task was to get the confirming evidence.

Williams arrived in Japan on 27 September to work with the 2nd Australian War Crimes Section. I presume he was not the first Australian in Tokyo looking into war crimes. His address on his reports of 6, 11 and 14 October 1945 from Tokyo is 'attached Recovered Personnel Division'.

Within 24 hours Williams had the confirmation he wanted: a letter from the Japanese navy reporting the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* and the 48 page roll. He radioed his first report on 29 September.

Ward made a public announcement on 5 October naming the *Montevideo Maru*, stating that the fears expressed by Forde were justified, and that the *Montevideo Maru* had carried 845 prisoner of war and 208 civilian internees.

The roll was being translated and next of kin were being informed as particular names were identified and checked. The casualty lists became public in newspapers from 17 October through to 22 November 1942.

### The missing Katakana roll

I have no idea what happened to the Katakana roll. There may be documentary evidence that it was placed in Central Army Records, but I have not seen it.

It might turn up. Sometimes these things are referred to another department - say Attorney-General's, because some matter of law arises, or Foreign Affairs - and are subsequently located by accident. But the more people are alerted to the fact that it is important and missing then the chances of it turning up increase. So power to your campaign.

**ROD MILLER comments:** Williams' report states he delivered the Katakana roll brought out of Japan to O2E [2nd Echelon] HQ, AMF. This was in Melbourne. I guess the question is would ATIS have got the Katakana roll from O2E? To my mind there are far more important missing documents to find - including Curtin's cable 489 24th November 1942 to Atlee.

## Letters

### Maxwell R Hayes

Thanks for the newsletter. You and the others are doing a fantastic job. Over the years I've done what I can to further this cause. If you wish, you may reproduce my articles originally published in *Una Voce*.

*Rabaul POWs heading for Australia in 1942? [December 2004]*

*So what happened to the Montevideo Maru Memorial [September 2007]*

*Lark Force commemoration [March 2008]*

*66 years on, recognition [June 2008]*

*The 'so called' MvM nominal roll [December 2008]*

This last article is particularly important as it proves beyond doubt that this roll, whatever it is called, was compiled between 23 January and 22 February 1942.

### John Bell

Enjoy the newsletter. Congratulations. It is a major undertaking.

An old friend of mine, Ken MacGowan, was born in Rabaul the same year I was born in Kavieng.

His father escaped Rabaul after the invasion, walked along the south coast, got a boat to the Trobriands and made it back to Oz.

He kept a detailed diary and some years ago Ken put together a video retracing his father's footsteps using the diary as a guide.

## ROD MILLER

### What happened to the men of Rabaul

In its simplest form the official explanation of what happened to the men on Rabaul can be written thus.

*The men were abandoned in Rabaul by the Australian Government; they surrendered or were captured; they were put on the Montevideo Maru, which was sunk by friendly fire. The Japanese crew saved themselves, but none of the prisoners.*

*Although aware of the sinking, probably for political reasons, the Japanese POW Information Bureau did not respond to enquiries about the fate of the prisoners until the end of the war.*

*The Allies had intelligence pointing them towards the true story, which they did not feel at liberty to divulge beyond a small audience.*

*The scale of the disaster, and the desire of the Australian Government to not publicise its original mistakes, resulted in bureaucratic corner-cutting in Australia.*

The small amount and problematic evidence of the sinking led to a failure to finalise casualty statistics, leading to unfortunate rumour and innuendo often damagingly propagated in books and the media about what should have been a straightforward process of informing grieving families and allowing them to adjust to their loss.

The Government's post-war refusal to inquire into what happened in Rabaul led to questioning of the official explanation by the families of the missing men. In turn, this led to various theories being developed about their disappearance.

An investigation into the missing men was launched after the Japanese surrender in 1945 when Major Harold S Williams was sent to Japan to report on the movement and disposal of all Australian POWs by the Japanese.

With the help of the Japanese, on the morning of the very first day of his investigation, a nominal roll of those aboard the *Montevideo Maru* was uncovered in the files of the Japanese Prisoner of War Information Bureau.

William's translation of the roll, his report and evidence collected from the survivors from Rabaul form the basis of the official archival material on which the official history of what occurred is based.

From our limited view point nearly 70 years on, with no survivors, no post war investigation into the fall of Rabaul or the sinking and little documentary evidence in the Australian archives, stories of missing loved ones have been passed from generation to generation with no satisfactory conclusion.

This has led to many opinions and theories being developed about what happened. In coming news letters I hope to review some of these theories with a view of examining the available evidence to support them.

## Additional notes

### Thomas's diary 1

Keeping a diary while a prisoner of the Japanese was risky.

Thomas wrote his in the Tolai language (Kuanua) using the Greek alphabet to ensure no Japanese who discovered it could understand it.

Of course, they might well have seen this 'code' as a proof of espionage.

### Jan Hoogerwerff

Hoogerwerff was the manager of the Rabaul Printing Works, which published the *Rabaul Times*, of which Gordon Thomas was the editor.

### Thomas's diary 2

Gordon Thomas's diary is on microfilm in the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau at the Australian National University in Canberra.

After the war he wrote a book about his wartime experience, based on the diary.

That book was never published, but there is renewed interest in getting it published now.



The Lark Force plaque at Bitapaka War Cemetery, outside Rabaul, New Britain

## REV NEVILLE THRELFALL

### That roll: a great & enduring mystery

I read in the *Newsletter* about the nominal roll of Australian prisoners in Rabaul (referred to as the Katakana Roll), brought back from Japan but which cannot be found.

What I have to say will not throw any light on its whereabouts but may be of interest in showing how it was used in 1942.

The Australians taken prisoner in January 1942 were held at first by the Japanese Army, which occupied the town of Rabaul on 23 January and controlled it until May 1942. Army officers recorded the names of prisoners as they were rounded up and these were collated in a roll.

The diary of Gordon Thomas, kept throughout his captivity, tells how this roll was used in late May 1942, when the Army was about to hand control of Rabaul and the prisoners to the Japanese Navy. Army officers conducted a roll-call that took a whole day because there were over 1,000 prisoners and language difficulties.

When the Japanese recorded prisoners' names in January, they made the prisoners write them and then they were transcribed into Japanese characters. But when the roll was called in May, prisoners had difficulty recognising the pronunciation of their names. In particular there was trouble with names such as Gascoigne and Hoogerwerff, and Scottish names like McKechnie "floored them completely", according to Thomas.

Nobody dared laugh, as this would have incurred a beating. This, then, was the roll handed over from the Japanese Army to the Navy in May 1942, and is almost certainly the basis of the roll carried to Japan and found there at the end of the war.

It was a roll of prisoners in the camp in Rabaul at the end of May 1942; but the question arises, was the roll found in Tokyo in late 1945 a roll of those who were shipped out on the *Montevideo Maru* on 22 June 1942?

Two points support the claim it was. (1) The roll found in Tokyo in 1945 apparently did not contain the names of Australian Army officers not on the *Montevideo Maru* but who were sent later on the *Naruto Maru* and survived. Nor did it contain the names of the four prisoners (including Thomas) who did not leave Rabaul in 1942 but remained as technical assistants to the Japanese. (2) In July 1942, as soon as those four Australians heard of the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*, they compiled a list of the names of the men they had seen at the roll-call and who left on 22 June.

After the war, the 60 officers were also able to supply names of the soldiers they had seen march out of the camp on 22 June. The names recorded by these witnesses tallied closely with the nominal roll found in Tokyo.

But what has happened to the lists? Were they thrown away or do they and the Katakana roll still lurk in some dusty corner of Australian Army archives?

## Letters

### Lindsay Cox

Congrats on a beautiful newsletter number 2! I photocopied it and forwarded it to several people with a family interest in the project.

A minor hiccup on page 7. The brass band march was indeed written by George Marshall but he had nothing to do with the 2/22nd Bn. Gullidge, of course, was the 2/22nd Bandmaster.

### Justin Taylan

I am founder and director of the non-profit Pacific Wreck website - a project to share information about WWII Pacific <http://www.pacificwrecks.org>

I have been told about your memorial service on 1 July at Subic Bay. I would like to attend the event, take photos and video that I am happy to share with you and your associations, plus cover the event on Pacific Wrecks website. Also to do some brief interviews with attendees.

One grandfather served in Australia (Rockhampton), New Guinea & Philippines. My other grandfather is Filipino. I will be in Manila for a cousin's wedding before your event. I look forward to it very much.

### Bruce Crawford OAM

As a person who had a relative on the *Montevideo Maru*, one of the longest serving members of the NGVR/PNGVR Ex-Members Association executive and a member of the PNGAA, I compliment you on your letter to the editor of *The Australian*. I hope it is published. My experience with Ministers for Veterans Affairs going back to the days of Bronwyn Bishop is that they all need some prodding along.

## DON HOOK

### Rabaul POWs fearful of sub attacks

Australian prisoners of war boarding the ill-fated *Montevideo Maru* at Rabaul on Monday 22 June 1942 were fearful of being attacked by American submarines.

Nine days later, less than an hour after midnight on Wednesday 1 July, the ship was torpedoed at a point about 11 km off Cape Bojeador lighthouse on the northwest corner of the Philippines island of Luzon.

All 1,053 prisoners locked in the ship's holds - 845 Australian troops and 208 civilians - lost their lives.

Captain Lex Fraser, a commando officer who was a POW in Rabaul from February to July 1942 says that, shortly before sailing, the troops were separated from their officers.

"We were told they were to be transported on a 10-day voyage to a better place with plenty of food and accommodation, and away from the front line," Captain Fraser says.

"That sort of story was told everywhere to POWs and we did not believe it any more than others. Our guess at the time was that they were going to Hainan Island, and even then we were fearful of American submarine attack.

"We knew that they [the US submarines] were active, as the Japanese stores were getting low due to shipping losses."

Captain Fraser, second-in-charge of the First Independent Company headquartered at Kavieng, said the POWs were very worried about the separation and they'd exchanged addresses hoping that one day they'd meet again.

Writing in his unit's history *We Were The First*, Captain Fraser said he could still visualise his batman, Pat Byrne, who had just had his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. "I had become very close to him and it was sad meeting with his mother in Sydney after the war when I had to tell her his fate."

Captain Fraser, his fellow officers and a group of Army and civilian nurses boarded another Japanese freighter, the *Naruto Maru* on 5 July - about a fortnight after the *Montevideo Maru* sailed.

"We had several submarine warnings and were fastened down into the hold while the convoy scattered. We could hear the explosion of depth charges in the distance, apparently dropped by the escort destroyer."

The *Naruto Maru* arrived at Yokohama Harbour on Tokyo Bay on 14 July. During the next three years, the officers and nurses were prisoners at various locations throughout Japan.

After the war, Lex Fraser returned home to Ingham in Far North Queensland where he still lives. Now aged 90 he has been awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his services to the community.

## Letters

### Patrick Lindsay

I'm writing a book on the Coastwatchers. The Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* tragedies will be significant elements in the narrative.

I plan to start the storyline with the fall of Rabaul then link through subsequent escapes and atrocities to the Coastwatchers through individuals like Peter Figgis, Hugh McKenzie and others who were there from the beginning.

I'm keen to make contact with the families of any of the Coastwatchers with diaries and personal papers of their loved ones.

So I'd appreciate it greatly if you could keep your eye peeled for any such opportunities.

I have to deliver the MS by the end of this year and the book will be published by Random House in mid 2010.

[www.patricklindsay.com.au](http://www.patricklindsay.com.au)

### Jeremy Harrison

Amazing the about face of some politicians in the face of a few well written public responses. Well done.

By the way, I have launched the new website version. Not a huge amount of new content yet, but it's been a marathon effort just to get it online.

[www.montevideomaru.org](http://www.montevideomaru.org)

## MARGARET & SCOTT HENDERSON

### Dear Mr Butler, is there compassion?

Margaret and Scott are Friends of *Montevideo Maru* and live in North Haven, SA. This is an abbreviated version of a letter they wrote last year to their local Federal MP, Mark Butler (recently appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Health).

Dear Mr Butler,

You will be aware of the enormous response to the discovery of HMAS *Sydney*. This meant so much to so many people. You will also be aware of the movement to discover the wreck of the *Montevideo Maru*. We are writing to you to seek your support.

Past Australian Governments have been very secretive and non-cooperative in responding to questions about this disaster. The Government refused to contribute towards the cost of a memorial plaque in Kavieng, New Ireland and to a memorial in the Ballarat Gardens. We are heartened that unlike his predecessors Mr Rudd has expressed some interest in this matter.

The attitude of the Australian Government has created an aura of uncertainty about the *Montevideo Maru* disaster, which has led to rumour, speculation and conspiracy theories.

At the very least, it would be a huge step forward if the Government would release all files and material about the New Guinea war and the *Montevideo Maru* in particular. This could reduce the uncertainty and, perhaps, confirm or refute the theories. In our opinion, the relatives and descendants of the victims of this disaster deserve this simple gesture of openness.

The other issue is whether the wreck of the ship should be located. There is no question this is feasible. We know the coordinates of where she was sunk. It is, of course, unlikely that discovery of the wreck would resolve the questions about its human cargo. It is, however, certain that locating the wreck would be of immense comfort to surviving relatives and descendants. It would be declared an official war grave and could become the focus of memories.

We should declare our personal interest in this matter.

Margaret's father was a Methodist missionary on the island of Lavongai off the coast of Kavieng, New Ireland. Margaret was six months old when she was evacuated to Australia with her mother leaving her father behind. No attempts were made to rescue her father or other Australian civilians.

Indeed, the general belief is that the Australian Government refused permission to evacuate the civilian men on a ship that came to Rabaul. Instead the ship was loaded with copra. Nothing more was heard of Margaret's father until her mother received a telegram after the war ended saying that he had been drowned when the *Montevideo Maru* was sunk. Margaret has, however, heard from otherwise reliable sources that her father was beheaded on a beach in Kavieng well before the ship sailed.

We beg that you consider this matter and if you are persuaded by the reasonableness of these requests that you will actively support any move to open relevant files and to discover the wreck.

## Comment

### Tony Letford

It is unfortunate the Minister for Veterans' Affairs is "not aware of claims regarding lost documents or a cover-up" concerning the fate of the prisoners on the *Montevideo Maru*.

During the war it was believed that telling the truth about what was happening would lower morale. After the war the details of atrocities were played down or concealed because the emerging Cold War meant the West needed the support of Japan.

There was indeed a cover-up and, by the time governments in the West became more open, the world had moved on. One can only wish the *Montevideo Maru* Committee every success. We all need reminding from time to time of the terrible events that took place to our north almost 70 years ago, because the people who died so unnecessarily deserve no less.

We also need reminding of how and why our government chose to conceal the details of the tragedies and the atrocities. And the minister clearly needs reminding of facts that he, above all, should have at the back of his mind. It is his duty to preserve the memory of those who suffered such horrible deaths in that terrible time.

*Letter to Editor, Sydney Morning Herald, 19 June 2009*

## FIRMIN NANOL TALKS WITH KEITH JACKSON

### Call for recognition of disaster

**NANOL:** The *Montevideo Maru* transported 845 troops and 208 civilian men as prisoners of war after Japan invaded Rabaul in January 1942.

The ship left Rabaul on 22 June 1942 but nine days later on 1 July an American submarine torpedoed it off the Philippines coast. No-one survived Australia's worst maritime disaster.

Now the relatives of the men say they want the Australian government to say sorry after more than 67 years. Spokesperson Keith Jackson says they owe them an explanation as to why and how the tragedy happened.

**JACKSON:** The relatives would like the Australian Government to explain to them how the men came to be left in Rabaul when the Japanese invaded, because there were other ships going back to Australia from Rabaul and the men were told not to go on them. So there are two things. There is a need for more information and a need for some kind of recognition from the Australian Government about this tragedy. The relatives, even though it is a long time ago, nearly 70 years ago, still feel grief and they feel there is knowledge they would like about what happened.

**NANOL:** He says there are no records of the men who were on board the *Montevideo Maru* when it was torpedoed by the American submarine. Mr Jackson says this is something the Australian government should help find out.

**JACKSON:** The Japanese captured the men and loaded them onto the ship. The Japanese took a list of the names of the men, and that's the list that seems to have gone missing. So there is a bit of a mystery about this. So while the ship's location is known, the list of men who were aboard is not. It is probably somewhere in the records of the Australian Government and the committee really wants to see that list, to find it.

**NANOL:** On July the 1st this year, relatives of the men who died plan to unveil a memorial plaque at Subic Bay on Luzon Island in the Philippines, where the *Montevideo Maru* went down in 1942.

**JACKSON:** That's right. I'm sure that many of the relatives will want to be there, because this is one opportunity, perhaps the best opportunity, they have had to honour their relatives.

**NANOL:** The location of the wreckage is known, but no effort has been made to discover the remains. Some believe there is nothing left to find. Former Australian Opposition Leader, Kim Beazley, has given his support to the *Montevideo Maru* Committee to ask the Australian government to give recognition to those who died on the ship. Mr Beazley's uncle, the Reverend Sydney Beazley, who resided in Rabaul at the time of the Japanese invasion, was just 33 when he was believed lost on the *Montevideo Maru*.

*Source: Radio Australia, 6 May 2009*

## Montevideo Maru documentary

Find out more about John Schindler's two one-hour documentaries *The Tragedy of the Montevideo Maru* tragedy, which will be screened on Foxtel's History Channel around 11 November 2009.

[www.montevideomaru.com](http://www.montevideomaru.com)

## Websites

Rod Miller

[www.montevideomaru.info](http://www.montevideomaru.info)

Hell Ships Memorial

[www.hellshipsmemorial](http://www.hellshipsmemorial)

John Schindler

[www.montevideomaru.com](http://www.montevideomaru.com)

Montevideo Maru

Foundation

[www.montevideomaru.org](http://www.montevideomaru.org)

Salvation Army Museum

<http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/museum/>

Lost Lives

[www.jje.info/lostlives/places/montevideomaru.html](http://www.jje.info/lostlives/places/montevideomaru.html)

Rabaul Nurses

[www.rabaulnurses.com.au/Montevideo%20Maru.html](http://www.rabaulnurses.com.au/Montevideo%20Maru.html)

POWs - Lark Force & Civilians

[www.australian-pow-ww2.com/montevideo\\_maru\\_11.html](http://www.australian-pow-ww2.com/montevideo_maru_11.html)

Australian War Memorial

[www.awm.gov.au/atwar/remembling1942/montevideo/transcript.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/remembling1942/montevideo/transcript.asp)

Ballarat Memorial

[www.ballaratgenealogy.org.au/ex\\_pow\\_memorial.htm](http://www.ballaratgenealogy.org.au/ex_pow_memorial.htm)

Pacific Wrecks

<http://www.pacificwrecks.com/ships/maru/montevideo.html>

PNG Attitude

<http://asopa.typepad.com/>

Hellships Memorial

[www.hellshipsmemorial.org](http://www.hellshipsmemorial.org)

ILYA GRIDNEFF

## Not knowing men's fate was the hardest thing

**The hardest thing for families who lost relatives in the sinking of the Montevideo Maru during World War 2 was not knowing the fate of their loved ones.**

But for those families, closure may finally come on Wednesday when a plaque is unveiled at an official ceremony marking Australia's worst maritime tragedy.

Ailsa Nisbet, 82, along with her daughter Marg Curtis and cousin Ron Hayes, will represent one of 15 Australian families at the July 1 memorial at Subic Bay in the Philippines.

They leave Melbourne today to pay respects to Ms Nisbet's brother, Private John "Jack" Groat, who was on board the Montevideo Maru when it sank on July 1, 1942, carrying 845 prisoners of war from Australia's Lark Force and 208 civilian men.

The troops had been taken prisoner after Japan invaded Rabaul in Papua New Guinea in January 1942.

The unmarked Japanese ship left occupied Rabaul on June 22, 1942 but nine days later an American submarine, unaware it was carrying allied prisoners, torpedoed it off the Philippines coast.

The sinking of the ship was not reported back to Australia, and for several years the fate of the prisoners of war was unknown.

Ms Nisbet said for years her brother's fate was a mystery.

"The family was first told he was missing," she said. "Then they said 'missing presumed dead', then we got a message he was a prisoner of war, then we got a letter from Jack saying he was being looked after by the Japanese. But that's all. Mum didn't hear what happened until late 1945. And there is still doubt about it," she said.

Phil Ainsworth, in the Philippines for the event, said the committee aimed to get more national recognition for the tragedy. "This memorial will give the families some comfort because even now 67 years later they still feel discomfited and in grief," he said.

Veterans' Affairs Minister Alan Griffin marked the 67th anniversary of the sinking of the Montevideo Maru in a speech to Parliament last Friday. "I've spoken to individuals who lost family members as part of the Montevideo Maru and I know these things remain with people forever," he said. "I express my heartfelt sympathy for their loss."

*Source: Wartime sea tragedy to be marked by Ilya Gridneff [AAP], The Age. 29 June 2009. Read the entire article here*

REV NEVILLE THRELFALL

## The fateful order: 'Continue loading copra'

The failure to evacuate civilians on the Norwegian freighter Herstein [left], in port at Rabaul in January 1942 just ahead of the Japanese invasion, occurred because of an order that the ship was to "continue loading copra".

It is usually stated that the Curtin Government made this heartless response to the request by Harold Page, Deputy Administrator at Rabaul, that Australian civilians, except for some essential personnel, be evacuated on the Herstein.

But who was actually responsible for that order? Prime Minister John Curtin had his hands full with the 8th Division fighting a losing battle in Malaya and other Australian troops fighting in North Africa, where Tobruk had just been relieved.

It is extremely doubtful that he knew about Page's request. The request was sent to the Department of External Territories, which passed it on to the Treasury because of the commercial importance of the copra waiting to be loaded at Rabaul.

Again, it is doubtful whether Treasurer JB (Ben) Chifley saw it. Some Commonwealth departments were located in Melbourne and some were in Canberra. Cabinet ministers were kept busy shuttling between the two cities (costing the lives of three ministers when their plane crashed near Canberra in 1940.) More likely a public servant in the Treasury made the decision, for that is where the reply originated.

My authority for this is an interview with the late Jim Burke in 1981. Jim was employed in the Public Service of the Mandated Territory in 1941 and, when Australian women and children were evacuated from Rabaul on the Neptuna and the Macdhui on 22 December 1941, he was posted to the Neptuna as welfare officer for the evacuees.

When he reported to External Territories in Australia he was told not to return to Rabaul and was seconded to the Treasury for the rest of the war. While working

there Jim saw the original of the telegram: "Continue loading copra".

Page's first telegram was sent on 16 January 1942. He repeated his request on the 19th, while copra loading continued. But the only answer came from Japanese dive-bombers, which on 20 January set the Herstein's cargo ablaze and reduced her to a total wreck.

Harold Page was a very correct public servant and had obeyed orders.

Weeks later he confided to his fellow-prisoner Gordon Thomas that he now wished that he had acted on his own initiative and carried out the evacuation without official permission; but it had not entered his head to do so at the time.

Page himself would have remained in Rabaul in any case, with a few others to maintain order; but in the end he joined the other Rabaul civilians on the *Montevideo Maru* who paid with their lives for the demand to "continue loading copra".

## History Channel to screen MvM documentary

Foxtel's History Channel has announced that later this year it will screen John Schindler's two-part TV documentary to commemorate the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*.

The publicity claims the documentary will also "uncover the mystery behind it".

The series is titled *The Tragedy Of The Montevideo Maru*. "We're thrilled to be able to continue our commitment to commissioning vital Australian documentaries for our national audience," said group channel manager for Foxtel's History Channel, Jim Buchan.

"In the tradition of event television such as *The Battle of Long Tan*, *Beyond Kokoda* and *He's Coming South*, we regard the visual documentation of Australia's history an important part of remembering the legacy of our brave men and women."

Mr Buchan said the documentaries will ensure that the Australian soldiers who served on New Britain and New Ireland, and who perished on that fateful night, will never be forgotten.