

So what happened to the Montevideo Maru memorial??

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RPNGC 1959-1974

One of Rabaul's most treasured memorials of the Japanese occupation of Rabaul (culminating in the sinking of this unfortunate vessel of the OSK Mitsui line, commandeered by the Imperial Japanese Government, and used for the conveyance of Australian POW from the New Guinea islands to Samah Harbour on Hainan Island), first attracted my attention in 1960. Not, I must confess, for its significance but as a means of earning 10/6d. The tragic story surrounding this ill fated vessel torpedoed with the loss of 1,053 military, missionary, civilian and police POW on 1 Jul 1942 is now well known and needs no mention here, except for a further report in the PNG Post Courier on 29 January 1971.

In a full page article, on his retirement from RPNGC, Inspector Nelson Tokiel mentioned events during his career. He had joined the former New Guinea Police Force, as a bandsman on 25 January 1938 and served in Rabaul under W/O David Crawley. As such, he was familiar with many of the leading citizens of Rabaul. As a police constable, he and others evaded capture after the Japanese captured Rabaul on Friday, 23 January, 1942 for a couple of months by traversing the jungle behind Rabaul, but was eventually captured, and along with another policeman (Henry Tohian, later Inspector in the RPNGC) forced to work as labourers. In the course of digging tunnels, Nelson became aware that Harold Page, secretary to the Administrator and about 20 other Europeans were imprisoned in a tunnel under heavy guard. One night this group was loaded onto a Japanese vessel and the captured labourers were loaded onto another vessel. The flotilla consisted of 7 warships and 7 cargo boats which sailed for Salamaua and on to Buna where the leading vessel carrying Page and the other Europeans was bombed in shallow waters by the Americans and beached. This vessel was the *Ayatosan Maru* bombed on 22 July 1942. I, knowing Nelson and having the greatest respect for his integrity, accept his version of Page's fate along with additional unknown Europeans from Rabaul.

In mid 1951, Albert Speer, M.B.E. was on a medical patrol in Cape Killerton, Gona, Tufi, Buna area following the disastrous January 1951 Mt. Lamington volcanic eruption (which killed more than 3,000 and wiped out the small town of Higaturu). He observed a graveyard containing around 20 graves between the high water mark on the beach and Canon Benson's church at Buna. He enquired about this and was told by the local villagers that, after the vessel beached, white prisoners (some injured) came ashore and were later shot by Japanese Kempeitai. The villagers buried them as they "were white men" and marked the graves with wooden crosses made by mission carpenters. Albert was told by District Commissioner, Sydney Elliott-Smith, to make no mention of this in his patrol report.

In August 1959, I arrived in Rabaul as the most junior commissioned officer of the Royal Papua & New Guinea Constabulary. Despite living in this (then) halcyon town, I found the expenses of supporting a family on the low pay rates then prevailing to need a little assistance. In due course, as it was known that I

was a former RAAF photographer, R.W. Robson of Pacific Publications made contact with me and offered me the chance to augment my salary by sending photographs of Rabaul events and personalities for publication in Pacific Islands Monthly at the rate of 10/6d per print. In the course of the next six years, I had over 300 photographs published in P.I.M. with many in territory newspapers as well.

It seems appropriate to complicate the issue at this stage. When Rabaul returned to post-war administration by early 1946, the recognition of a need to commemorate the 1942 battle and subsequent loss of life at the hands of the Japanese during the three and a half years occupation of Rabaul was paramount. Australian Army construction units created two identical memorials each on a two tier cement plinth and around six feet in height. One at Vulcan Beach on the side nearest to Rabaul, where the landing and battle took place, and the other at Toboi, where the p.o.w. were supposed to have physically boarded the Montevideo Maru.

The following is based on the best evidence available to me from documentary material, personal conversations and recollections. I hope that this is correct but welcome further corrections, if any.

Vulcan Beach Memorial

On 23 January, 1946, the first memorial service, in the presence of a large number of service personnel, local citizens and accompanied by the Papuan Infantry Brigade band under the command of Private Eremas Tolik (later to have a distinguished career in RPNGC, rising to the rank of Inspector) gathered at the Vulcan Beach site around dawn in drizzling rain and, after inspection of the A.I.F. guard of honour by the General Officer Commanding, Major General K.W. Eather, several wreaths were laid in commemoration of the battle four years earlier. There are further references to annual ceremonies at this site and a couple of photographs depict a cross (probably wooden) at the foot of, or on, this memorial. By 1949 this site had been, more or less, abandoned. In 1953, the memorial had toppled into the sea and was reinstalled by a Rabaul firm. PIM deplored the lack of interest in this memorial referring to the area as a rubbish dump. By about 1965, this memorial had fallen into total disrepair and the site was inaccessible; however the last recorded service was held there in 1969 by some hardy citizens making a track through the kunai and rubbish. If it survived after then, it would surely not have survived the 1994 eruption of Vulcan.



AWM photo 124105 Vulcan Beach site

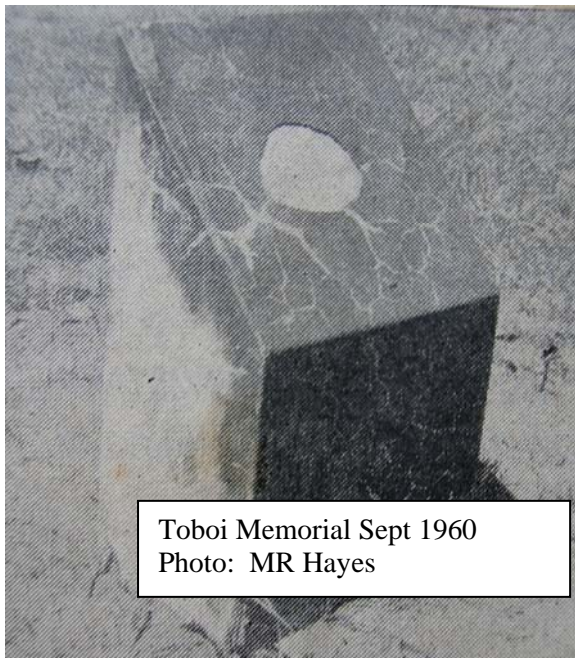
Montevideo Maru Memorial “The Itinerant Memorial”



AWM photo 124110 Toboi

At about 8am on the same date, after all had returned to Rabaul for breakfast, a very similar well attended service was held at the memorial near the end of Wharf Street in the area known as Toboi. A perusal of a 1946 AWM photo depicts this memorial as indicating its proximity to a line of buildings, but it is not sufficiently clear enough to place its position in relation to the actual shore line. Annual commemoration ceremonies were held at this site for some years.

In 1950, the Rabaul R.S.S.& A.I.L.A Battlefields Memorial Committee took over the maintenance of the memorial, contemplating installing plaques on both memorials and it may well be that it was then re-sited closer to the Colyer Watson wharf but, as the re-siting was of a temporary nature, the two tier plinth was not moved. Later it was intended to create a more permanent memorial of stone, suitably engraved, and the views of New Guinea widows were sought. Finance for this project was not forthcoming and any future permanent memorial plans were shelved.




Toboi Memorial Sept 1960
Photo: MR Hayes

So it came to pass, that I noticed a small dilapidated unnamed concrete memorial on the foreshore at Toboi a short distance from where Wharf Street ended, and one of my first photos was published in October 1960. This apparently abandoned and unloved memorial, only some three feet in height and devoid of the former twin tier plinth was then located near the native quarters of the Shell Company depot. It bore no indication as to its significance, looked abandoned and missing a damaged circular portion of the fascia on the memorial caused correspondents in PIM and the New Guinea Times Courier to testify that there had been a plaque. Others were categorical in stating there had never been a plaque. An examination of the shallow cement surface indicated that there has

never been a plaque on this important memorial.

This publicity appears to have spurred ladies, many of them war widows, of the New Britain Womens' Club into action. With donations and assistance from Rabaul businesses by October 1963 the memorial had been refurbished, mounted on a single tier plinth and painted white. Shortly afterwards, a

suitable plaque was mounted and, at last, all knew of the purpose of this memorial. I have a photo of the memorial at this site in August 1970.



Montevideo Maru Memorial, Oct 1963, refurbished with plaque added a short time later

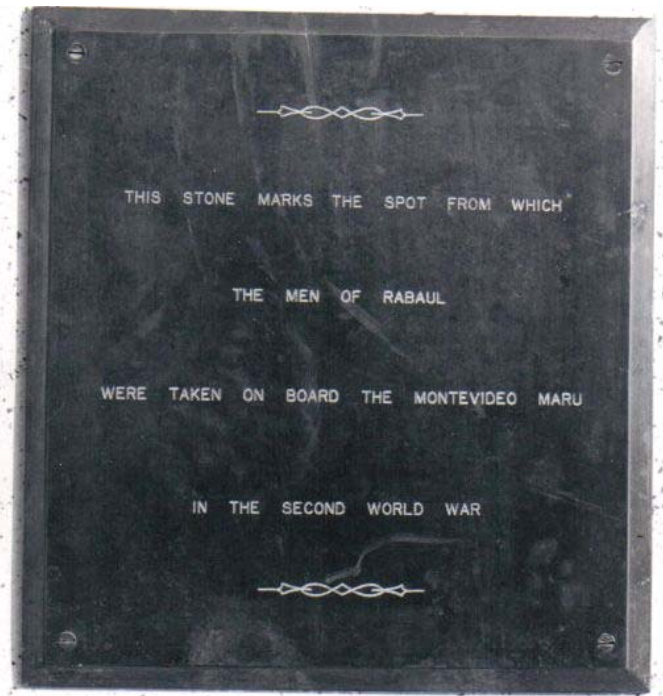
Photos: MR Hayes

There are now two scenarios as to the re-siting of this memorial and, at this stage, I cannot affirm which is correct as by 1970 I had been posted from Rabaul and rely on the testimony of those there subsequently and whose recollections differ.

1. Some time prior to 1971, the memorial was removed from its Toboi site to further around Simpson Harbour and mounted on a single plinth just above the waterline on Cleland Drive, about 300 metres north of the Rabaul Yacht Club. The reason for this re-siting, or by whom is not known. There is no reason for it to be in this position although another p.o.w. ship is believed to have departed from near here. On 14 July 1971, a tsunami of some 2-3 metres of water entered Simpson Harbour and temporarily inundated much of the town. It appears that the memorial was toppled over and damaged by this wave and was then forgotten. In 2001, Bill Harry, a 1942 veteran and frequent visitor to Rabaul, told me that this memorial was washed away in a tsunami.

2. It is the recollection of Revd. Threlfall that the memorial was not re-sited on Cleland Drive until later than 1972. If this is correct, why then was the following commemoration ceremony not held at Toboi in 1972, as mentioned in the talk by Kim Beazley (below) wherein he says, "that he (Beazley) was taken by natives who knew his brother (lost on the *Montevideo Maru*) to the water front at the spot where the memorial is and had actually been seen going out onto the ship".

In 1972, Bishop Simon Gaius of the Methodist Church suggested that there be a commemoration service for the soldiers, the 16 missionaries, and civilians lost on the *Montevideo Maru*. It was agreed that a better site for public access and recognition would be at Cleland Drive, rather than the largely inaccessible site at Toboi. Revd. Neville Threlfall then organized a commemoration service at 4.30pm on 22 June 1972, with about 200 persons attending, at the Community Hostel on Cleland Drive to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the sailing date of that unfortunate vessel. Acting District Commissioner, E. Vin Smith



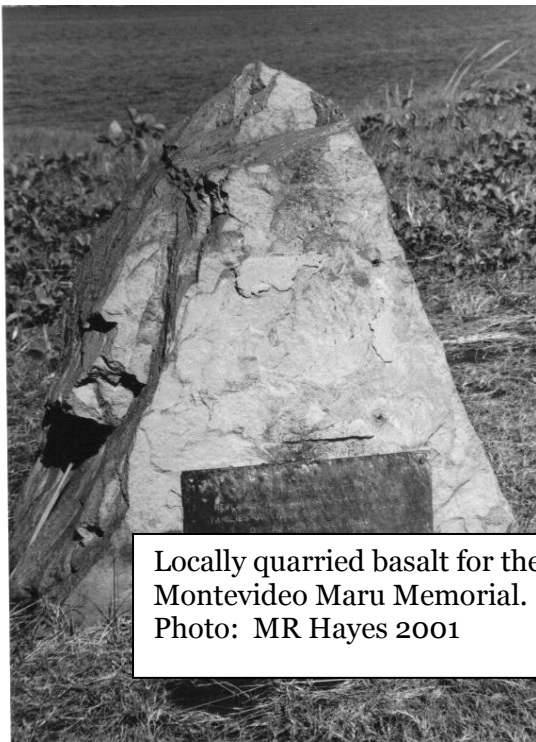
addressed the assembled crowd on the significance of the background of former events. Other speakers were Mr H. W. Smith of the Rabaul RSL representing the 2/22nd Battalion Association, Revd. N. Threlfall, Revd. Mikael ToBilak of the Methodist Church, Father Mooney of the Catholic Church, Pastor Solomon of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, Mr Henry Chow, President of the Rabaul Town Council., and Mr Kim Beazley (snr) M.H.R. A special postmark designed by personnel of the Methodist Church was applied to Posts and Telegraphs covers as a special commemorative postmark.



Despite which ever of the above propositions is correct, it remains a fact that the memorial was moved from Toboi to a position on the waterfront at Cleland Drive about 300 metres north of the Rabaul Yacht Club.

Commemorative 30th anniversary postmark issued 22/6/1972

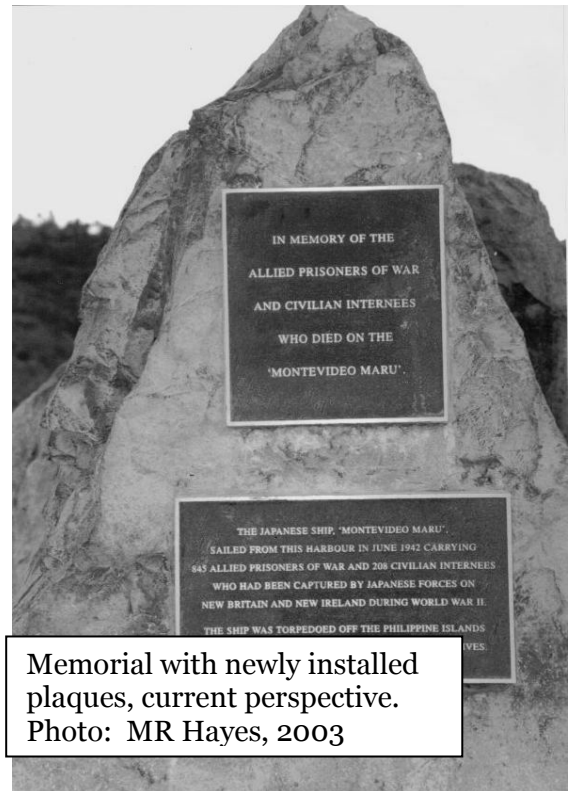
Enter a new Montevideo Maru Memorial. On a date which I have not been able to ascertain, a pyramid shaped piece of local rock was quarried and placed, (partly buried for stability), some 10 metres from the shore line at the above position. In July 2001, I saw this and noted a plaque on the rock which said, 'This memorial cairn replaces the original erected by the families of those who lost their lives on the Montevideo Maru. Original was situated on the foreshore at the approximate spot from which the Montevideo Maru



Locally quarried basalt for the second Montevideo Maru Memorial. Photo: MR Hayes 2001

left as indicated by the arrow'. There was, however, no arrow, only evidence of one having been removed.

In September 1993, a number of former Rabaul citizens returned for the commemoration of 'The Rabaul 1942-1945 Memorial', a very large piece of locally quarried basalt, organized by former coastwatcher and very long time Rabaul citizen, Mathew Bernard Foley, with Peter Cohen



Memorial with newly installed plaques, current perspective. Photo: MR Hayes, 2003

and the Rabaul RSL and placed about 50 metres in front of the Montevideo Maru pyramid memorial and surmounted by a very large bronze plaque detailing events of Rabaul from 1942. This rock was commissioned on 16 September, 1993, at a well attended public ceremony.

Both memorial rocks remained in situ, and were covered with about a metre of ash in the 1994 eruption. They were subsequently dug out, though they remained in a hole surrounded by ash, looking rather forelorn.

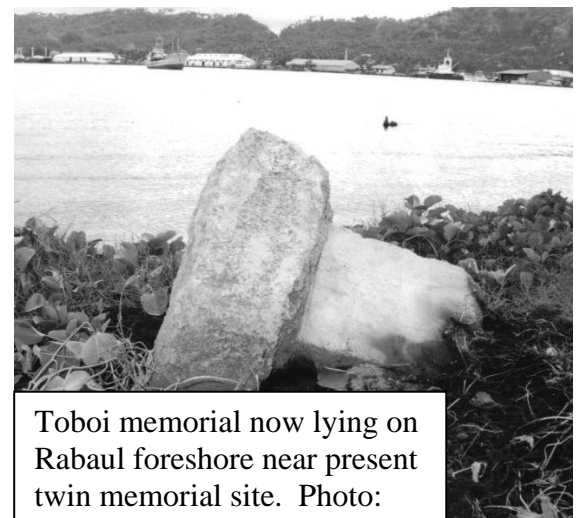


The two memorials joined on a cement base by OAWG in late 2002. Photo: MR Hayes 2003

In November/December 2002, the Office of Australian War Graves, mounted both rocks on a large cement slab about 2 metres apart and facing different directions; the Rabaul memorial rock faces the remains of the town, and the Montevideo Maru memorial rock faces the harbour. Two new bronze plaques were added to this memorial.

In August 2003, I was wandering along the foreshore near the memorial site and located, with much surprise, the damaged remains of the original Toboi memorial lying very much abandoned, damaged and partly buried by sand.

So we can establish, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was moved from Toboi to Cleland Drive on a date unknown. It was considerably damaged, but by a tsunami or by vandals, we know not. And there it remains; there being no plans by the Rabaul Historical Society to reclaim and restore this once important memorial to lost lives.



Toboi memorial now lying on Rabaul foreshore near present twin memorial site. Photo: MR Hayes, 2003.

Sixty five years after the events of 1942 there is, as far as I know, no official Government recognition by way of a memorial to commemorate Australia's greatest loss of life in a single maritime incident in World War 2. The Montevideo Maru memorial at Ballarat, Victoria, commissioned on 7 February, 2004 was financed by private contributions. This memorial was resurfaced recently to include additional names of units previously not mentioned. There are unit and personal plaques erected at the Austin Repat. Hospital at Heidelberg, Victoria, and in the Anzac Shrine in Brisbane. Perhaps others?

Why does the cover up still exist? ■