



Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Memorial, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ACT



Bitapaka War Cemetery, Rabaul, Papua New Guinea

The Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Memorial at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, ACT is a special place for the relatives and friends of those with a connection to this part of Australian history. Following the dedication of the memorial, the Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Society (originally the Montevideo Maru Memorial Committee) was integrated into the Papua New Guinea Association of Australia Inc. The aims of the group are to ensure that the story stays in Australia's national consciousness, and the fall of Rabaul and surrounding islands, and the sinking of *Montevideo Maru* remain an enduring part of the country's history.

WHEN THE WAR CAME: New Guinea Islands 1942 is an outstanding contribution to these objectives and we are grateful to the many who have shared their recollections and photographs to enable this social history to be told.

For those of you that had family members or friends involved in this crucial period, or are just interested in Australia's past, *WHEN THE WAR CAME: New Guinea Islands 1942*, with over 460 photographs and 540 large format pages, is an invaluable addition to your library.

This is a vital chapter in a tragic conflict that should be better understood and, hopefully, more deeply remembered.

For more information or to purchase this book, please visit one of our websites

www.memorial.org.au / www.pngaa.org



Papua New Guinea Association of Australia Inc.

When the War Came

NEW GUINEA ISLANDS 1942

Personal stories of those who faced WWII on Australian territory and our greatest maritime disaster—the sinking of *Montevideo Maru*



WHEN THE WAR CAME: New Guinea Islands 1942

In January 1942 Rabaul was Australia's front line in the Pacific war. This war was fought on Australian soil against Australian people. It was a critical time in the history of both Australia, and what was then the Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea.

This book is published to commemorate the 75th anniversary of this period in the New Guinea Islands, and is a collection of personal stories, memories and reflections that enhance the history of civilians and soldiers living in Rabaul, Kavieng and the New Guinea islands at the outbreak of World War II, who suffered a fate that is seldom acknowledged—when the Japanese bombed, and subsequently invaded Rabaul, the capital of New Guinea, in January 1942.

... the number of Australians who died as a result of the Fall of Rabaul is nearly five times the number of victims in the first bombing raid of Darwin

A militia unit—the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR), using obsolete WWI equipment—had been formed in 1939 in the Territory with its headquarters in Rabaul. This was made up of planters, administration officers, traders, schooner masters and other members of the community—men between sixteen and forty-five with intimate knowledge of New Guinea and its people. Many of the soldiers and civilians who were rescued owed their lives to members of the Papua New Guinea Administration, the New Guinea residents and some courageous Papua New Guineans.

In 1941 the Australian Army sent Lark Force to Rabaul, and 1 Independent Company to Kavieng. The defence of New Britain, a 1,600 km coastline, was to be the responsibility of 1,400 Australian troops, based around the 2/22nd Battalion.

The first Japanese surveillance aircraft flew over Rabaul on 8 December 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor. On 11 December 1941 Canberra said there would be no evacuation, reversing this decision the following day. Males over sixteen years were to remain, although there were cases of younger boys staying.

... the women were led to believe their husbands would join them shortly in Australia

The first bombs were dropped on Rabaul on 4 January 1942, and the last civilians were taken out on 8 January 1942. 1,700 servicemen and at least 300 European civilians were not evacuated, despite several ships entering Rabaul during December 1941 and January 1942.

Air attacks were made by the Japanese on Rabaul and Kavieng on 20 January. Rabaul saw eighty bombers and forty Zeros bomb

shipping, wharves, airfields and buildings. It was only a few hours after the Japanese landing on 23 January 1942 that word went out *'Every man for himself'*.

Those who escaped were considered the lucky ones and yet what many of them went through, walking hundreds of miles over rugged mountainous jungle in the wet nor'west season, crossing raging rivers often infested with crocodiles, suffering hunger and starvation and the dreaded malaria, can only be imagined.

Japanese brutality towards prisoners of war, coastwatchers, interned civilians and missionaries in both New Britain and New Ireland was regular—158 were murdered at Tol, more at nearby Waitavalo and thirty-two in the Kavieng massacre.

For those captured or who gave themselves up, there was five months of imprisonment labouring for food. On 22 June 1942, following the Coral Sea Battle, 1,053 prisoners were embarked on the unmarked Japanese hellship, MS *Montevideo Maru*, torpedoed by an allied submarine, USS *Sturgeon*, off the coast of the Philippines on 1 July 1942. It was the only hellship with no allied survivors, and it remains Australia's greatest maritime tragedy.

... it was not until three years after the event that the news of the fate of the ship was released

The sixty officers who had been separated from the men, together with nurses and one civilian woman, were shipped to Japan on 6 July and spent the rest of the war years as prisoners of war. In addition, more than 150 civilians, many of them nuns, were eventually liberated from a valley camp at Ramale in the Kokopo area after WWII ended.

Rabaul became a key Japanese staging and supply centre, headquarters of the Japanese South East Fleet. In 1945, when Japan surrendered, there were nearly 100,000 Japanese troops and auxiliaries in this part of New Britain.

The Australian Government chose not to hold a postwar enquiry, but there's no excuse today not to right the wrongs of the past. The war is long gone but the pain and anger of descendants of victims will not fade away. The anger part could be eased—by giving the events of Rabaul 1942 due respect and recognition.

... we, who are left, are eternally grateful for the freedoms we enjoy now—don't let us or our children ever forget