

RECOGNITION & RESOLUTION

Rabaul & the Montevideo Maru - A Nation Acknowledges its Grief

Monday, 21 June 2010

“On behalf of the Australian Government and the Australian Parliament, I would like to express our sincere regret and sorrow for the tragedy that occurred with the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* on 1 July 1942”

- Hon Alan Griffin, Minister for Veterans' Affairs & Minister for Defence Personnel



Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Society

June 2010



At Peace Now: Interpretation of the Montevideo Maru by Christine Arnott, 2010

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The Speeches

On Monday 21 June, 2010, the Parliament of Australia acknowledged and expressed its regret and sorrow for one of the nation’s greatest wartime tragedies, the sinking on the Japanese prisoner-of-war ship, the *Montevideo Maru*, with the loss of all prisoners – civilians and service personnel – who had been captured and interned by Japanese forces in Rabaul in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea.

Parliament further paid tribute to the relatives of the men who died for their forbearance and strength over the many years it had taken for Australia’s worst disaster at sea to be officially recognised at a national level.

This commemorative handbook reproduces the seven speeches made on the day – a day on which, through its elected representatives, the nation showed it cared about the grief and hurt that had been experienced.

The Resolutions



THAT THE HOUSE:

(1) expresses:

(a) the gratitude of the Australian nation to the service personnel and civilians in Rabaul and the New Guinea Islands for their services in the defence of Australia during World War II; and

(b) its regret and sorrow for the sacrifices that were made in the defence of Rabaul and the New Guinea Islands and in the subsequent sinking of the Montevideo Maru on 1 July 1942; and

(2) conveys its:

(a) condolences to the relatives and loved ones of the people who died in this conflict; and

(b) thanks to the relatives for their forbearance and efforts in ensuring that the nation remembers the sacrifices made.

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Honourable Kevin Rudd MP



FROM THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES HANSARD

Distinguished Visitors

Mr RUDD (Griffith — Prime Minister) (3.46 pm) — On indulgence: I acknowledge in the gallery today the presence of family and friends of the *Montevideo Maru*.

They are here to listen to an upcoming ministerial statement to the parliament by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs.

Most Australians are familiar with the circumstances surrounding those tragic losses and on behalf of the government, and I believe on behalf of the parliament, I welcome them to the chamber today.

I am sure that the minister's statement on these matters will deal with many of the concerns they have raised about the sinking of that vessel.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

Honourable Alan Griffin, MP

Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister for Defence Personnel

I acknowledge the presence in the House today of many of the family, friends and loved ones of those lost on the *Montevideo Maru*, some of whom have travelled great distances to be here.

I also acknowledge that this tragedy has touched so many Australians, including members of Parliament – both past and present.

Former patron of the Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* Society, the Honourable Kim Beazley AO, lost his uncle who was on board.

My colleague is the Honourable Peter Garrett, current patron of the Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* Society, whose grandfather was also lost when the ship sank.

I'm sorry Minister Garrett is unable to be here today as he is attending the International Whaling Commission in Morocco.

I address this statement to the families and to the House.

On behalf of the Australian Government and the Australian Parliament, I would like to express our sincere regret and sorrow for the tragedy that occurred with the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* on 1 July 1942.

The opening months of 1942 were a dark time in Australia's wartime history.

Singapore and Java had fallen, our defensive outposts in Rabaul, Timor and Ambon had been lost, and the Japanese had already begun a series of bombing attacks on Australia, beginning with Darwin on 19 February 1942.

Success in the battle of the Coral Sea provided a check to Japanese plans, but even so in May 1942 the war was brought home to Australians on the east coast when the Japanese attacked Sydney Harbour from the sea.

And we were not to know that in a matter of weeks our nation was to suffer its most terrible maritime disaster—when, in a matter of moments, more Australians would be killed than would be lost in all the nation's wars and conflicts since the end of the Second World War.

But let me step back in history a little bit first.

The fall of New Britain in January 1942 was one of many disastrous battles involving Australians in the first months of the Pacific War.

Lark Force, as the Australian defenders of the island were known, was hopelessly outnumbered, poorly equipped and had no plan of withdrawal. The Chiefs of Staff recognised



that the Force had no chance of repelling an invasion, but felt, nonetheless, that the Japanese should be made to fight for the island and the deep-water harbour at Rabaul.

The defenders put up a brave fight, but the outcome was never in doubt. Of some 1,500 troops, 30 were killed in the fighting and about 400 escaped the island. Another 160 were killed in the Tol plantation – one of a series of massacres of prisoners committed by the Japanese in the opening months of the war.

The survivors became prisoners of war. Several hundred civilians who had been living and working on the island were also interned. Little was heard of, or from either group again.

There was one occasion, however, in April 1942, when prisoners were given a chance to write to their families. The letters were dropped in mailbags over Port Moresby and about 400 were delivered.

For many who received these letters it was their last contact.

On 22 June 1942 just over one thousand men, military prisoners and civilians, were marched from their camps to Rabaul's harbour. On other days they had walked the same route to work on the docks, but this time they carried whatever kit they possessed and were flanked by guards with machine guns.

Chinese and New Guinean dockside labourers saw them board a ship, the 10,000-ton *Montevideo Maru*. They were among the last to see her human cargo alive.

Lieutenant Commander Wright, captain of the American submarine, USS *Sturgeon*, wrote in his log that, early on the morning of 1 July 1942, his submarine chased a large ship as it sped from the Philippines westwards into the South China Sea. He guessed that it was heading for Hainan, and for some time doubted whether he could catch it. But by 2.30 in the morning the submarine had drawn close enough to fire its torpedoes.

Four were fired from 4,000 yards, two hit, and the tragic fate of the *Montevideo Maru* was sealed — the ship sank within ten minutes.

Only three lifeboats were lowered, all capsized and one was badly damaged. After the sinking there were few survivors in the water and the Japanese crewmen and naval guards who had made it onto the lifeboats headed for the Philippines coast.

According to Japanese accounts, the captain and more than ten of his crew reached land where most of them, including the captain, were killed by Filipino guerrillas. Five survivors set out on foot for Manila, two died en-route, the rest took 10 days to reach the city.

They reported the sinking and a search was immediately ordered, but too much time had elapsed and no trace of either the *Montevideo Maru* or survivors was found.

For the families of the men who had been on the ship, there was never any news during the war but Japanese authorities had known of the loss since shortly after the sinking.

The ship's owners were informed three weeks after it happened — and in January the following year the Japanese Navy Department forwarded details of the sinking to the Japanese Prisoner of War Information Bureau, together with a nominal roll of the prisoners and civilians on board.

During the war the International Committee of the Red Cross made several enquiries concerning the men who had been captured on Rabaul but received no answer.

In 1944 the Japanese Foreign Office sought information on the missing civilians from Rabaul, but no response was forthcoming and the Swiss legation made at least seven unsuccessful attempts to get the same information.

Like many who waited in Australia for news of the men who had been lost as the Japanese advanced through Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific in 1942, the families and friends of the soldiers and civilians who had been captured on New Britain, had spent three and a half years wondering and hoping.

Mrs Rhoda Coote was one of those wondering and hoping and writing letters to try and find out what was happening to her husband.

Evacuated to Australia with her daughter just before Christmas 1941, Mrs Coote only expected to be separated from her husband for a few months.

In 1942 GF Haughan, from the Red Cross in Port Moresby, wrote a letter in response to Mrs Coote:

“I am unable to give you any news of any great importance but would like to point out that the news you mention regarding your husband is not, I’m sure, correct. Please do not let that worry you.

“I have made a careful check on all the records held here and the only news I can give you is that just after the Japanese invasion your husband was seen at Gillalum Plantation in the company of Ernest Banks, Bill Yarrington, Tom Walker, Ted Allan, Tom Herkut, C Clunn, P Ryan, H Fulton and Dick Moore.

“I shall keep a close check for you; as a resident of New Guinea for some years I know a number of those persons who are missing and I will forward any news that comes my way.

“I can only ask you to look on the bright side and hope all will turn out for a happy reunion for your husband.”

This letter was dated 18 November 1942 – five months after Philip Coote had perished on the *Montevideo Maru*. It was three more years before Mrs Coote would find out that there would never be a reunion with her husband Philip.

It was a difficult time for the families waiting and hoping, especially for those like the Cootes who had been evacuated to Australia. They left behind their husbands, sons, brothers; they left behind their homes and their community - they faced some very long, lonely years.

I know some of you are here today, including Philip Coote’s son, daughter and three of his grand-daughters; along with some of the families of those men mentioned in the letter - Walker, Ryan and Fulton, and I acknowledge your strength and fortitude.

By the end of September 1945, lists of men recovered from Japanese prison camps were being published every day, but more than 5,000 Australians remained unaccounted for — including those from Rabaul.

I think it’s important to note here that over the years there have been suggestions that the *Montevideo Maru* either never existed, or that the Japanese actually massacred the prisoners and used the *Montevideo Maru's* sinking as the explanation for their disappearance.

Such speculation is understandable when the loss of a ship and almost all on board is at question and the evidence lies mostly at the bottom of the sea.

But the existence of the ship is beyond doubt as the Australian War Memorial holds photographs of it in its collection, and the material that is available indicates that the *Montevideo Maru* was indeed sunk and that more than one thousand prisoners died when this happened.

Stories suggesting the loss of a Japanese prison ship carrying many of the missing men from Rabaul first appeared in Australian newspapers on 26 and 27 September 1945, and on 28 September an Australian officer fluent in Japanese, Major H.S. Williams of the 1st Australian POW Enquiry Unit, was searching through records in Tokyo's Prisoner of War Information Bureau when he found a list of 1,056 names.

Many were of servicemen identified by name and serial number, the rest were civilians. Their place of capture was given as Rabaul and many appeared to be Australians – but the names having been translated from English into Japanese script and then back again created considerable difficulties.

The Director of the Japanese Prisoner of War Information Bureau admitted that full details of what had happened to the men from Rabaul had been in Japanese possession since the beginning of 1943 and he expressed regret that no details had been transmitted to Australia.

The translated roll reached Canberra in late October 1945 — telegrams were sent to families across the country confirming what they had feared; few of the men taken prisoner or interned on Rabaul in 1942 had survived the year.

From these records – although not all the names were on them – it was clear that they were made up of: members of the 2/22nd Battalion, 1st Independent Company, the Fortress Artillery, Signals Units, Number 17 Anti-tank Battery, the Anti Aircraft Artillery, Number 19 Special Dental Unit, detachments from New Guinea Volunteer Rifles, 2/10 Field Ambulance, Ordnance Corps units, the 8th Division Supply Column, the Canteen Services Headquarters New Guinea Area, the Royal Australian Air Force; the Royal Australian Navy; and Australian civilians.

To date the original Japanese nominal roll has not been recovered but the Department of Defence is still undertaking a search.

In common with all those who died in our name in the World Wars, each of those lost on the *Montevideo Maru* is officially commemorated by name by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

The service personnel are commemorated on the Memorial to the Missing at the Rabaul (Bita Paka) War Cemetery, and the civilian dead are commemorated on the Roll of Honour located in Westminster Abbey.

Collectively the service and sacrifice of those who were lost is commemorated on the *Montevideo Maru* Memorial that is co-located with the official memorial to those lost at Rabaul on the waterfront of Simpson Harbour; at the National POW memorial at Ballarat, and more recently plaques have been placed at the Hellships Memorial at Subic Bay in the Philippines.

These commemorations provide a physical base of remembrance that complements the tireless efforts of the loved ones left behind to keep this terrible tragedy at the forefront of our minds, and in doing so to keep the promise that “we will remember them”.

Quite rightly the story of the *Montevideo Maru* will not end here.

I expect historians in Australia and across the world will continue in their search for the missing pieces of the puzzle including the lost records.

And I know fundraising efforts are also underway to erect a memorial here in Canberra at the Australian War Memorial.

As we stand here today I would like to formally mark the great loss of the *Montevideo Maru* and honour those who died.

Australia is forever grateful for their service in defence of our nation during the Second World War.

I would especially like to acknowledge the great emotional suffering of the families and friends they left behind.

These people endured many long and painful years waiting for news of their loved ones and they deserve to be remembered.

The fortitude needed to survive the three years it took for the tragic news of the death of their loved ones to reach them is exemplary. And I extend to them my whole hearted condolences.

Their experience is an integral part of our wartime history.

I acknowledge their grief has extended beyond the years of uncertainty. Not having a marked grave to signify their loved one's life has weighed on many families - even to the present day.

The Australian Government will continue to work with them, the Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* Society and others interested in this tragedy to ensure the *Montevideo Maru* remains a part of our living history.



The Montevideo Maru pictured off Capetown in 1926

Louise Markus, MP

Member for Greenway



Wives, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, those who survived the events of 1942, loved ones and friends of the *Montevideo Maru*.

In this place on Monday, 21 June 2010, the Australian parliament is formally recognising remembering and commemorating the loss of lives during the fall of Rabaul, the Battle of Kavieng, the Tol Massacre and the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* by torpedo in the early hours of 1 July 1942.

It is a time for us to honour the service of those who were lost, killed or are missing from the *Montevideo Maru* and from activities on and around the mandated islands of New Guinea from New Britain, New Ireland, New Hanover and the surrounding islands.

It is my privilege and honour to speak on behalf of the federal coalition in response to the ministerial statement of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and the Minister for Defence Personnel on the *Montevideo Maru*.

Today is an important day, tinged with sadness for survivors and families of the lost. Equally, it is a day for Australia to remember and commemorate those who gave their lives and who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Sixty-eight years is a long time to wait for such a moment. I would like to acknowledge the attendance today of the Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* Society and the representatives and members of the *Montevideo Maru* Foundation.

Specifically, I would like to acknowledge the presence of veterans of the campaign in the mandated territories and survivors of Japanese prisoner of war camps.

I also wish to welcome the wives, sons, daughters and other family members of those who we honour today. Many have travelled long distances to be in Canberra today for this historic moment.

Many people have played a role in bringing this to pass. They are too numerous to name. However, to the Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* Society and the *Montevideo Maru* Foundation, led by Keith Jackson AM and Cynthia Schmidt respectively: I place on record the appreciation of all those involved with bringing about this occasion today.

The events which led to the death of 1,053 men on the *Montevideo Maru* on 1 July 1942 are important moments in Australia's military and national history. The 1919 League of Nations mandate over the New Guinea territories permitted Australia to administer the former German territories but not to militarise them.

Australia strictly abided by the terms of the mandate. The island of New Britain was never significantly fortified by the Australians. In 1939, with the threat of war in the Pacific

looming, the Australian government established a token militia. The voluntary New Guinea Volunteer Rifles were the core of military defence in the territory. They consisted of fewer than 300 men.

Responding to the growing threat to Rabaul and Australia's broader strategic interests in the 1930s and 1940s, in February 1941 the Australian government assembled the Lark Force and dispatched it to Rabaul.

The Lark Force consisted of a group based on the 2/22nd Battalion, raised in Victoria as part of the 23rd Brigade, 8th Division, 2nd Australian Imperial Force. These 1,400 troops were never in a position to properly defend Rabaul or even repel an attack.

Days after the 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour, the Australian war cabinet authorised the compulsory evacuation of women and children from Papua and New Guinea to Australia. Males over 16 were to remain in Rabaul with their fathers.

Six brave government nurses were offered evacuation but volunteered to stay. The Australian Army Nursing Service nurses stayed, as it was deemed their duty to stay with the men. In total, almost 1,800 women and children were evacuated by 29 December 1941. Christmas 1941 was, for many, the last time they would see husbands, brothers and sons alive.

By 19 January 1942, a few weeks before the fall of Singapore, the Australian war cabinet decided to evacuate non-civilian personnel. Sadly, this came too late. Four days later, the Japanese landed at Rabaul. Rabaul fell on 23 January 1942. Hundreds of Australian servicemen and locals were interned in local POW camps.

Four hundred and fifty men were reported to have escaped through the New Britain jungle, although few of them survived. No provision had been made by Lark Force commanders for guerilla warfare or for escape through the jungle. No supply depots in the thick jungle of New Britain had been constructed.

During the course of World War II, my father-in-law, Masa Markus, a national of Papua New Guinea and, if you do not mind, I would like to mention him today - served in what came to be known as the Pacific Islands Regiment.

As a New Guinean, he was interned by the Japanese in a prisoner of war camp at Malaguna, only three miles from Rabaul. He escaped and, fortunately, was picked up by a US ship while swimming in the ocean.

On 4 February 1942, a massacre at plantations at Tol and Waitavalo saw 160 men shot or bayoneted. On 22 June 1942, an estimated 845 prisoners of war from Lark Force and 208 interned civilian men were marched from their camp in Rabaul to be sent via ship to another camp in Hainan, in China. Ordered into the *Montevideo Maru*, these men were marching to their deaths.

Japan's occupation of Rabaul provided them with a key base to launch attacks against Australia and the United States. Bombing raids over Townsville and Cairns were made easier by Japan's Rabaul base. At the end of the war, 100,000 Japanese soldiers and auxiliary staff were stationed at Rabaul.

The stories of those who were lost on the *Montevideo Maru* are truly moving. There is indeed an overwhelming sense of loss for those who remain who are searching for the truth, endeavouring to understand what happened on 1 July 1942.

Just who was aboard the *Montevideo Maru* when she sank? Who escaped the Japanese advance, only to perish in the jungle of New Britain? There are still questions left unanswered.

I am aware of five survivors of that terrible time in early 1941 who are here today with us: Stan Cooper, Lionel Veale, Norm Furness, David Harper and Fred Kollmorgen. Your stories are ones of sheer bravery, courage under fire and mateship. They are values that we honour as those of the Anzacs. Your spirit and endurance place you also in their league.

While every story is significant, in the time available it is not possible to cover every one of the recollections of those who were there. One story about Fred Kollmorgen particularly caught my attention. The story given to me goes like this:

Fred was the sole survivor of the Salvation Army Band. He escaped down the south coast of New Britain.

Fred is a survivor of the 2/22nd Band. This was a military band largely composed of bandmen from the Brunswick Salvation Army but also included members from Springvale, Moreland and Hawthorn.

They were led by Bandmaster Arthur Gullidge, who was the Bandmaster at Brunswick and to this day is recognised internationally for his brilliance as composer and musician.

Some of the bandmen were on the *Montevideo Maru* and some were murdered in the Tol Massacre. Fred escaped by walking 700 miles, canoeing 60 miles, wading 25 miles and boating 80 miles along the south coast of New Britain.

That in itself is no easy feat. Together with my husband, who grew up in Rabaul, and our children, I have walked through the jungle of New Britain. It is tough going. It goes on:

It was an epic journey, punctuated by aggressive aerial surveillance by the Japanese, severe malaria, malnutrition, crocodiles, little clothing, the crossing of fierce streams and a treacherous jungle.

There are wives and children here today. The impact of these tragedies on families is important to acknowledge. Barbara Selby is the wife of survivor the late David Selby, who, I am told, was one of the first troops to be in action on Australian territory in the Second World War.

David's brother, Benn, is also here today, as are David and Barbara's three children, Alison, Elizabeth and Bill. I am told that, after the "every man for himself" order went out as Rabaul fell, David ensured that his guns were destroyed so that they would not fall into enemy hands.

He and his mates then fled through the jungle of New Britain. Sadly, some did not make it through. After six weeks they were found and repatriated to Australia. After the war, David Selby QC had a distinguished legal career, including time in Papua New Guinea as an acting judge of the Supreme Court. He served as Deputy Chancellor of the University of Sydney for 15 years. David's story is another one of great endurance.

Mary May and her daughter Dr Marian May are also here with us. Mary's husband, Reverend John May MBE, was chaplain to Lark Force in Rabaul. John was a POW sent to Japan on the *Naruto Maru* before he was released in August 1945.

John May later became the chaplain at the Royal Military College at Duntroon here in Canberra. Sadly, John died earlier this year.

Mary has recorded:

Before his stroke in January, John was making a big extra effort to walk every day so that, should such an event take place, he would be in a fit state to attend! He'd even bought a new pair of shoes in readiness!

Mary, on behalf of the House today, we extend our condolences and sorrow that John is not here.

Nancy Ward is here today from Ocean Grove in Victoria. Nancy's father is presumed to have been lost on the *Montevideo Maru*. She, like many other sons and daughters of those lost, has waited a long time for some form of recognition of the circumstances which led to the loss of their parents.

A person who hoped to be here today is George Hill from Western Australia. Sadly, he is too unwell to come to Canberra. His father was lost on the *Montevideo Maru*. George was just nine when he lost his dad.

His mother was left to raise six children in Mildura in northern Victoria. George's brother, Frank, wrote a book about the *Montevideo Maru* which was donated to the RSL in Mildura. George says the book was never finished; Frank did not know how to write the final chapter.

In South Gippsland in the member for McMillan's electorate is the small town of Leongatha. In 1941, 16 young men left Leongatha to fight in the Lark Force, and only three came home. Their story has been documented by local historian Lyn Skillern, who writes:

One of the saddest stories I have uncovered is that of the 16 local men from the Leongatha and District who went to Rabaul with Lark Force. Of the sixteen, six were on the *Montevideo Maru*, six were massacred at Gasmata, three returned home to South Gippsland and Bill Owen was killed in action later in the war after escaping from Rabaul.

Lyn recalls the names of the soldiers presumed lost on the *Montevideo Maru*: Jack Howard, Fred Broadbent, Fred Ketels, Jimmy Kavanagh, Arthur Oliver and Tom Sangster. About Fred Ketels, Lyn writes:

Fred was born in Foster [in South Gippsland] in 1913, grew up in Leongatha and attended Leongatha State School. His mother waited for him for the rest of her life. His brother Cliff was killed in New Guinea with the 2/5th Battalion. She used to travel to Melbourne often with Mrs Howard and Mrs Broadbent to visit the Battalion Headquarters. They found support there with the mothers and wives of the 2/22nd Battalion men.

There are stories of other families:

The Bellington brothers, Bill and Tom, who were executed at Gasmata. They were from Nerrena East, near Leongatha. Bill was born in Nerrena in 1907 and Tom there in 1908. They lived on the family farm. The boys had spent much of their time since leaving school unemployed. Joining the army probably seemed a good idea. Their father Harry wanted someone to tell him what happened to his boys and no one ever did. It was too much for him and he took his own life.

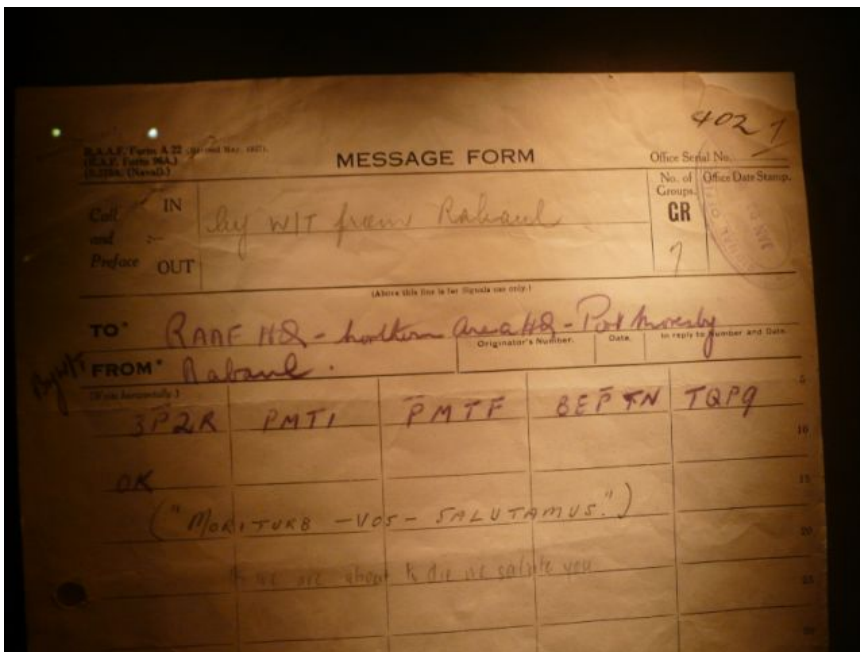
I have had the privilege and honour of visiting Bita Paka War Cemetery, observing the tropical jungle. Today it hides the secrets of that time, that dark hour in Australia's and Papua New Guinea's history. The remnants of Japanese occupation remain in Rabaul today.

Jungle tunnels contain submarines fitted on rails, ready for deployment into the ocean. Maintenance facilities and concrete bunkers are still in place, now covered by overgrown jungle. Unexploded ordnance remains.

Later this year, the 70th anniversary of the formation of Lark Force will be commemorated in Benalla in regional Victoria. I understand the state member for Benalla, Bill Sykes MLA, has coordinated an event in response to community support for such a commemoration.

It is a shame that more Lark Force veterans are not alive today to receive their due recognition for service rendered to Australia.

I want to close today with another quote, this time from Wing Commander Lerew.



At the time of the Japanese landing, 24 Squadron had a small number of Wirraways on New Britain.

As the Japanese arrived, Lerew signalled RAAF HQ in Melbourne with the Latin phrase “nos morituri te salutamus” – or the English translation: “We who are about to die salute you”.¹

Today it is we who are living today in freedom who salute the men and women of that time in New Guinea in 1942.

Lest we forget.

¹ Rev John May provided Lerew with the Latin for the quotation, *We who are about to die salute you!* He was very proud of this and was concerned that a number of people got the story wrong or incomplete – *Marian May*

Senator Anne McEwen

Senator for South Australia



I begin by acknowledging today's tragedy in Afghanistan where three Australian defence personnel have died and a further seven have been wounded.

I offer my sympathy to their families and friends and to the loved ones of others on board the helicopter that crashed. We can never forget how dangerous war is and how brave are those who serve on our behalf.

Tonight I would like to speak about another wartime tragedy, the 1942 tragedy of the *Montevideo Maru*, and the efforts of a group of supporters, families and friends to make sure Australians know the story of the *Montevideo Maru* and of those personnel and civilians who served in defence of Australia in Rabaul and the New Guinea islands during World War II.

The sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* was the worst maritime tragedy in Australia's history and the campaign to remember it was acknowledged today by motions in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Earlier today, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Mr Alan Griffin, made a ministerial statement in the House expressing Australia's gratitude to members of Lark Force. He also expressed regret and sorrow for their sacrifices and extended condolences to the relatives and loved ones of all those who died in the conflict.

It is the first time the story of the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*, which occurred on 1 July 1942, has been officially recognised by the federal parliament.

Today, more than 300 people came to Canberra to be part of the recognition activities in this place, and it was my pleasure to meet many of them this afternoon. Although it has taken close to 70 years to get here, today is a very important day in Australia's history and I hope the formal acknowledgements in this parliament will give some solace to the families and friends of those who never returned from the islands of New Guinea after the conflict in Rabaul.

In 1941 a small Australian Army garrison of approximately 1,400 personnel was deployed to Rabaul, New Britain, on the tip of the eastern province in then New Guinea, to garrison the outpost, protect its airfields and seaplane anchorages and act as a link in a chain of observation posts across the northern frontiers.

Lark Force consisted of a number of Australian battalions, representing Australia's first line of defence in what is now Papua New Guinea. As is the case now whenever we recall the Australian battalions that fought in World War II, we know there are so few of the members that are still alive. It is important we acknowledge their stories—and their hopes—while we can. That applies to the members of the battalions that comprised Lark Force.

Unfortunately, when Lark Force was deployed it was not suitably manned or equipped to defend Australia's territory from the Japanese assault. Mr Norm Furness, a Lark Force veteran who made the trip to Canberra today for this historic event and who has devoted

over 50 years to trying to gain recognition for his battalion and his comrades, has spoken about what it was like to be out there as a 19-year-old during the conflict. He said:

We were poorly equipped, mainly with stuff from WWI that had been packed in grease for 20 years ... we were supposed to be a garrison force and build up the fortress to protect the base and the airfields, but the extra equipment and reinforcements never came. We had two field guns and one was cracked ... and our airforce consisted of 10 Wirraways and two Lockheed bombers—trainer planes really.

In late January 1942, it is estimated that a contingent of between 15,000 and 20,000 Japanese soldiers overwhelmed our defences in Rabaul. The Australian garrison was not reinforced, nor was it ordered to withdraw, leaving the commanding officer to declare ‘every man for himself’ just hours into the invasion. That situation had been foreseen by the Australian chiefs of staff months prior to the attack.

Five days after the Japanese entered the war in the Pacific, the Australian chiefs of staff had to advise the war cabinet whether to reinforce, withdraw or leave the troops in Rabaul. Despite Australia’s awareness that our defences would not be able to hold out against a strong Japanese force, the troops were left in place and only European women and children were removed from the territories.

The Australians left behind had to fend for themselves. Approximately 400 of them fled into the jungle. Many were recaptured and an estimated 130 were tortured and massacred at Tol Plantation.

About 300 members of Lark Force, Norm Furness included, spent nine long weeks battling the jungle, enduring starvation and avoiding Japanese patrols to reach safety 450 kilometres away on the southern end of the island.

They were the fortunate ones and were returned to Australia. Most Australian soldiers, though, became POWs, held by the Japanese at their compound for a number of months along with civilian POWs.

On 22 June 1942, months after their imprisonment, the surviving POWs were marched to the unmarked Japanese freighter ship *Montevideo Maru* for transport to the Chinese island of Hainan. Approximately 1,050 Australian soldiers and civilians boarded the doomed ship.

On the morning of 1 July 1942, the *Montevideo Maru* was torpedoed by the US submarine the *USS Sturgeon* in the South China Sea approximately 100 kilometres west of Cape Luzon in the Philippines. The *Montevideo Maru* sank with its hold full of Australians.

For reasons still unknown, the Japanese had failed to announce that their steamer was carrying POWs, even though it was an established practice under the Geneva convention. The American submarine had no way of knowing that the *Montevideo Maru* had POWs onboard.

A few crew survived the sinking and some eventually made it to Manila to report the sinking but, despite a search, no survivors were found.

The sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* was the worst maritime disaster in Australia’s history. But what happened afterwards was perhaps almost worse. The sinking was not immediately reported back to Australia.

When the sinking was finally confirmed, there was doubt as to who was on the ship, who had died at sea, who had died on land beforehand in camps or when captured and who had survived. Families spent more than three years wondering about the fate of those they loved.

Some received misinformation and were told their family members had survived when they had died on the ship. Some were told their family members had died on the *Montevideo Maru* when in fact they had not been on the vessel and had probably been killed when still on land.

And now, 68 years later, some families still do not necessarily know the truth about how their grandfathers or fathers died. That is partly because of incomplete information and the loss of the original Japanese nominal roll that listed those who had been POWs.

But it was also because of a lack of determination by the Australian and Japanese authorities to acknowledge the atrocities that occurred at Rabaul and the terrible mistake that led to the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*.

For the families and friends of those who were in Lark Force and of those civilians who were in Australia's service in the New Guinea islands during the war, the grief and misunderstanding of not knowing exactly what happened to their loved ones or having any official recognition of their service has been a lifelong burden.

Today's events in the parliament go some way to redressing those wrongs.

I would like to thank all those who worked tirelessly to get the federal parliament to the stage we were at today to make acknowledgments through our motions and through the afternoon tea that was hosted by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs.

It was well attended, I have to say, by members of all parties in the parliament. All of those involved in the *Montevideo Maru* campaign deserve our support. Unfortunately, there are far too many of them for me to mention tonight.

I was pleased therefore to hear Minister Griffin announce today a government commitment of \$100,000 to assist the *Montevideo Maru* committee to build a national memorial in the grounds of the Australian War Memorial.

Let us hope we do not have to wait too much longer for that memorial to be opened. As we say on Anzac Day every year, 'Lest we forget.' We should not forget what happened with the *Montevideo Maru*.

Catherine King, MP

Member for Ballarat



I am pleased to speak on this motion in recognition of the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* on 1 July 1942. The story of how so many Australians died on board the *Montevideo Maru*, despite it being our nation's most horrific maritime disaster, is little known.

This Japanese transport freighter was carrying over 1,000 military prisoners of war and civilians. Over 800 Australian soldiers and 206 civilians were believed to be locked in the ship's hold when she sank. No Australian survived—the biggest single loss of life in our nation's wartime history.

Many of those who died were members of Lark Force. Lark Force comprised the 2nd/22nd Battalion AIF and supporting units, 1,400 soldiers in total. The 2nd/22nd Battalion, which formed the nucleus of Lark Force, was originally based at Mount Martha, on the Victorian peninsula.

The majority of these men came from Victoria, from rural and metropolitan areas. The force arrived in the island on 26 April, tasked with protecting the airfields and seaplane base at Rabaul. The force was ill equipped and was vulnerable to Japanese attacks.

The Japanese began bombing in January 1942, and by the morning of 23 January Lark Force commander Colonel John Scanlan ordered a withdrawal from Rabaul, stating that it was 'every man for himself'. Of these Australian troops, around 400 escaped and returned to Australia. Of the remaining troops, over 800 became prisoners of war and 160 were massacred at Tol Plantation.

Those remaining members of Lark Force were taken prisoner by the advancing Japanese army and were placed in POW camps in Papua New Guinea. Australian and European civilians who were living and working in Rabaul at the time were also taken prisoner by the Japanese army and placed in the POW camps.

In late June 1942, the troops and civilians were taken to the port city of Rabaul, where they were boarded onto the *Montevideo Maru*, which was scheduled to carry them to Hainan Island, in China, which was occupied by the Japanese at the time.

En route to Hainan Island, the *Montevideo Maru* was intercepted by the American submarine the USS *Sturgeon*.

Unaware that there were Australian POWs on board, the USS *Sturgeon* torpedoed the ship at 2.29 am. Eleven minutes later, the ship sank. It is thought that most drowned where they were imprisoned in the hull of the ship as it took on water.

From my own district of Ballarat, they were Corporal Cheney, Private Gribble, Corporal Hicks, Lance Corporal Hodder, Lance Corporal Kirkpatrick, Private Ladner, Private Morgan, Private Reid, Private Tulloch, Private Wythe and Private Godfrey. Private Geoff Godfrey's brother Alan is in Parliament House today with his two daughters.

Of the Australian civilians to have died in the *Montevideo Maru*, one was Walter James Ryan. Walter had moved to the island in 1931 to work for a local trading company. Walter

was due for long-service leave in December 1941 but decided to hold off while his wife, Frances, moved to Sydney to settle the children into schooling. Walter was looking forward to following later in 1942 but he did not return home.

Walter's daughter Julia Richardson lives in my own electorate. She has said, like so many of the men and women who are here today, that their life was put on hold for over three years while they waited for the hope of news of their father.

The impact of this tragedy was felt by people right across our country. Loved ones and relatives of those Australians killed have carried the unbearable and unimaginable burden of losing a loved one at war.

Amongst these mourners are members and former members of this House. I respectfully acknowledge the loss of Reverend Syd Beazley, the Hon Kim Beazley's uncle, and of the grandfather of the Hon Peter Garrett, both of whom were on board the *Montevideo Maru* on that fateful morning.

As part of my contribution, I would like to read some words that Kim Beazley has sent specifically for this evening:

Families of those who lost relatives and loved ones in this our greatest loss at sea would be deeply grateful for recognition of their sadness and pride.

Most of us left now are too young to have known the fallen but they live richly in our family legend.

Australians are good at somberly recognising the sacrifice of their fellows.

Opening the nations arms through the Parliament to embrace the dear lost of the *Montevideo Maru* is part of a fine tradition.

The relatives of Syd Beazley - and, I am sure, many of those here today - would be warmed by this embrace.

The story of the *Montevideo Maru* will live in our nation's history. It is remembered on the national prisoners of war memorial in Ballarat and on other memorials across Australia and internationally.

In this parliament, I formally acknowledge those who died on the *Montevideo Maru* and I pay my respects to their families and their friends who are present with us today.

Steven Ciobo, MP

Member for Moncrieff



It is indeed a privilege to rise this evening, on behalf of the coalition, to add the support of members on all sides of the chamber to the motion that has been put forward by the member for Ballarat and which has been spoken of today.

Principally, of course, to recognise the sacrifice of those Australian servicemen who lost their lives aboard the *Montevideo Maru* some 68 years ago.

As someone with involvement in the Montevideo Maru Foundation since my election in 2001, I want to pay particular tribute to Cynthia Schmidt and James Kennett who I know worked alongside so many others, all of whom have been tireless advocates of the *Montevideo Maru* and the need for recognition of Australia's worst maritime disaster.

Of what has been the worst maritime disaster there is still too little known. I know from the time that I have spent speaking face-to-face with people like Cynthia of the genuine grief and the need to have closure through a definitive answer to questions that have lingered for far too long.

The facts of the *Montevideo Maru*—the capture of the Australian Lark Force personnel and the civilian interns, as well as what we know about the circumstances of the ship's sinking—have been, today, relatively well documented, both in the House and by the member. But it stands in contrast to the history—that for so long so many people had no real clarity about the circumstances that took place.

What I want to talk about today—and I am mindful of the presence in the public galleries of survivors, of relatives, of family and friends—is the need for closure and the need for certainty for so many Australians who lost family members either on the *Montevideo Maru* or in the days before the ship set sail. In the past I have sponsored petitions in this place calling for the government to conduct an inquiry, and for a search for the *Montevideo Maru*.

It is important to acknowledge that not everyone is of the same view with respect to the relevance of that. But I have been persuaded over the years that an inquiry, and looking into the feasibility of a search, is the direction in which we should go to help to provide closure for those who still question who was on board and who was not.

In many respects, today is just a start. The formal recognition by this nation's parliament is something that has been well overdue for too long. But it is just another step on the journey. I know, from having had the opportunity just this afternoon to speak with family members, that there is still a great desire for more to be done.

That is why I was pleased that both the government and the opposition committed \$100,000 today towards an ongoing search, as part of an ongoing commitment to bringing closure to the families involved.

On this important occasion, when the families of victims have travelled from around Australia to be in the House of Representatives today, I want to renew that call for closure. For Australia's worst maritime disaster and following the joy of finding the HMAS *Sydney* and the Hospital Ship *Centaur*, I believe that we as a nation should expect nothing less.

I also think we should give consideration to a national day of remembrance to be celebrated on 23 January—the anniversary of the fall of Rabaul, New Britain, New Ireland and the surrounding islands of New Guinea. The reality is that, despite this being Australia's worst maritime disaster, there is not enough public awareness of the ultimate sacrifice made by more than 1,000 Australians in this incident.

Though most Australians know of the HMAS *Sydney* and the search for the *Centaur*, fewer Australians would know anything about the tragedy of the *Montevideo Maru*. It is my sincere hope that today will represent a turning point in the ongoing story of the *Montevideo Maru*.

I would also like to place on the record my profound respect and admiration for the Australian men and women who gave their lives in this horrible disaster. Though not a lot, and certainly not enough, is known about their fate, we can be certain of their bravery and sacrifice in the defence of our nation.

I have no doubt that all the people in the gallery today and all of those who read of this in subsequent days will stand proud of the fact that that sacrifice was not for naught but for our nation.

Bob Katter, MP

Member for Kennedy



I wish to offer this acknowledgement on behalf of my colleague the member for New England, Helen Seizan, and Ian Adams, representing the Armidale families who lost their grandfathers on the *Montevideo Maru*.

Lex Fraser, in my electorate, was one of the commandos fighting in and around Rabaul and his entire command perished on the *Montevideo Maru*.

Lex has carried almost to the point of obsession the loss of all of his men. He was not there; he was on another ship, being taken as a prisoner to Japan.

He has fought hard for their widows. All of his life he has fought hard for recognition of the men that died. So I would like to comment on that today.

In concluding my few words, I note half a dozen members of my immediate family were fighting in the islands during the Second World War. One of them ended up in Changi prison. He came home but died soon afterwards—and I acknowledge all the mothers, particularly those from that period.

His uncle was at Gallipoli. Seven years after his death at Gallipoli there was a letter—there is a number of letters on the file, including this one—from what was obviously his girlfriend.

She was still writing in the hope that he was still alive. She said she had heard rumours that he was still alive. How many hearts were broken as such people died.

Mark Turner is here today. I think his family should get special respect: three brothers were killed on the *Montevideo Maru* and their poor mother also lost a husband later in the war.

The entire male side of the family was wiped out. I think this incident is the worst incident in warfare, including battles, Australia ever suffered. It is very good, Minister, that we acknowledge today each of these men that died for us.

Although we lost most of the battles up there, they were lost in such a way that we were able to defeat the Japanese and throw them back and defend our country from invasion. That was the very real contribution made by these people in the great losses that they suffered.

Adjunct Professor Keith Jackson, AM

President, Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Society

The Rev John May, who died in January, was revered by many people here today, as he was by the men and women he ministered to in the prison camps of Rabaul.

John survived the war as a prisoner of the Japanese and continued to provide support and meaning to the families of the many men who did not return.

As his wife Mary has recorded, for John the tragedy of the *Montevideo Maru* did not fade with the years.

Instead it increasingly occupied John's mind as he worried at the lack of recognition, and resolution, for the families and friends.

John, like so many others, did not live to be here with us today in this fragment of our country's history he so profoundly wished for.

But John did know this was afoot. And today, in thanking all of you for your fortitude and resolve over so many years, I pay tribute to John and all those other people who refused to let the flame be extinguished.

I must also thank Alan Griffin for his understanding of the significance of this and for his dedication in ensuring the tragedies of the New Guinea Islands and the *Montevideo Maru* are appropriately recognised this day.

Without Alan's commitment, the events of today simply would not have transpired.

Of course, he has been supported by many others across all political parties, including the shadow minister Louise Markus, to whom we also express our gratitude.

I want to pay further tribute to Andrea Williams. You all know of Andrea's immaculate attention to organisational detail. Perhaps you are not aware that it is her advocacy that resulted in the establishment of the Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Society.

Beyond this important day, I can assure you that the Society will continue its work to ensure the events in the New Guinea Islands in 1942, and their terrible consequences, are recorded, memorialised and remembered.

Thank you, one and all.

