THE MONTEVIDEO MARU

When someone is killed by the enemy during war it is a tragedy. When people are unknowingly killed by 'friendly fire', it is a disaster.

In 1941, Rabaul, at the northern tip of the island of New Britain and an important part of the Australian mandated territories of Papua and New Guinea, was virtually undefended.

There were no fixed defences and a small number of Australians who were serving in the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles.

In April 1941, 'Lark Force,' the 2/22nd Battalian of the A.I.F. arrived in Rabaul along with 24 Squadron R.A.A.F. with outdated Hudsons and Wirraways.

There was a total of some 1400 defenders.

On 4th January, 1943, the first Japanese bombs began to fall on Rabaul.

On 20th January, 120 Japanese aircraft attacked and made short work of the R.A.A.F. defenders.

They also sank the *Herstein*, a Norwegian ship sent to evacuate civilians.

The first landing barges of the 5000 strong Japanese arrived on the 22nd January and they quickly occupied the town.

Some 400 of the airmen and 'Lark Force', headed by the Administrator, Wor. Bro. Walter McNicoll, K.B.E., a member of the Goulburn Lodge of Australia No. 58, escaped to the south of the island and thence on to the New Guinea mainland.

Reports of the fall of Rabaul appeared in Australian newspapers including the Japanese shooting of 150 Australian P.O.W's at a plantation on the island.

Then, Inexplicably, Japanese aircraft over Port Moresby dropped bundles of letters from prisoners in Rabaul. Most of the prisoners, including nurses and civilians, said they were being reasonably well treated. That was all Australians would learn for the next three years.

On 22nd June 1942, the civilian and military prisoners at Rabaul were loaded on to the Japanese passenger ship, *Montevideo Maru*.

The officers and nurses were not included.

They were shipped to Japan in another vessel and all survived the war.

With 845 prisoners of war and 208 civilian prisoners on board the *Montevideo Maru* sailed for Hainan, a large island, now part of China, in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam.

The prisoners included the six heads of department in the pre-war administration in New Guinea, planters and businessmen, sixteen missionaries, many soldiers of the 2/22nd Battalion including the band who had been members of a Salvation Army band before joining a different army, the Norwegian crew of the *Herstein* and 133 men of the 1st Independent Company from New Ireland who had been captured at sea.

Meanwhile, on 5th June 1942 the American submarine, USS *Sturgeon* left Freemantle in Western Australia on her fourth south-west Pacific patrol.

The *Sturgeon* caught up with a Japanese merchant fleet off Manilla in the South China Sea and torpedoed one of the largest ships.

After suffering only minor damage from a depth charge attack, on 1st July 1942, the *Sturgeon* sighted, torpedoed and sank what appeared to be an unescorted Japanese cargo ship some 100 km., west of Luzon.

The ship was unmarked and the Captain of the *Sturgeon*, W.L. 'Bull' Wright , simply did not know that the *Montevideo Maru*, which he had just sunk, carried a human cargo.

The *Sturgeon* then torpedoed a tanker before returning to Freemantle to report a successful patrol.

None of the 1053 prisoners survived.

Most of the crew of the *Montevideo Maru* and the guards reached the shore in the Philippines where many were killed by local guerillas. Only 3 Japanese guards and 17 crew survived.

Nobody in Australia knew of the sinking or the fate of those who had sent the letter dropped over Port Moresby.

After the war, the Australian authorities sent for Major Harold Williams, a long-term pre-war resident of Japan, to Tokyo and, after finding the evidence, the Minister of Territories, Eddie Ward, told the Australian Parliament the details of our worst maritime disaster.

The first Lodge in what is now Papua New Guinea was Rabaul Lodge No. 4468, United Grand Lodge of England. The Lodge was formed in 1919 and, after going into recess during the Japanese occupation, resumed work after the war.

There were several members of the Lodge on the *Montevideo Maru*.

Among those lost were three members of New South Wales Masonic Lodges. There may have been others. They were :-

* Alfred George Sawkins, a civilian of Lodge Ibis No. 361 meeting at Griffith.

* Ronald Norman Wayne, a civilian of Lodge Antiquity No. 1 meeting in Sydney.

* Alfred John Tritton of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles of Lodge Camden No. 217 meeting at Camden.

LEST WE FORGET

G.H.C.

REFERENCE :- Mark Nelson - The Montevideo Maru.

The Montevideo Maru
Lost at Sea, Lost from Australian History

By Hank Nelson

Starboard view of the Japanese passenger vessel Montevideo Maru.
Photo: Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial

On 5 June 1942, the United States submarine, Sturgeon, commanded by W. L. ('Bull') Wright, left Fremantle in Western Australia on her fourth war-time patrol. After a six-hour chase on 25 June, the Sturgeon caught up with a Japanese merchant fleet off Manila in the Philippines. It fired three torpedoes at one of the largest ships and then evaded depth charges. The Sturgeon reported that a 'few' gauges and lamps were shattered. On 1 July while about 65 miles west of Luzon, she attacked and sank what appeared to be an unescorted transport, the Montevideo Maru, and on 5 July scored hits on a tanker in a convoy. She was back in Fremantle on 22 July. It had been a long, dangerous and apparently successful patrol. But between leaving from and returning to an Australian port, the Sturgeon had unwittingly and for long unknowingly fired the shots which resulted in Australia's greatest tragedy at sea.

n late 1940, a year after the start of World War II, the Australians had almost no defences in Rabaul, then the headquarters of the Australian administration of the Territory of New Guinea. There were no fixed defences and the only trained men were the few Australians - and later Chinese - who had volunteered for part-time service in the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles.

They also had New Guinean riflemen in the police force. But the Australians were unsure just how they could or should use the police in the event of an attack. The absence of defences in Rabaul was not unusual and there was not much more protection in Port Moresby or Darwin.