

# **“Lest We Forget”**

**An Address on the Occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the  
Sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* .**

**Australia’s worst maritime disaster with the loss of 1,054 lives.**

**Major General John Pearn**



**The Montevideo Memorial, The Australian War Memorial, Canberra.**

**The Address delivered at the Shrine of Remembrance, Anzac Square, Brisbane,  
On the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the sinking of the *MV Montevideo Maru*.**

**Hosted by the NGVR-PNGVR Ex-Members Association**

**Friday, 1 July 2022**

**Major General Professor John Pearn AO RFD**

**Patron, New Guinea Voluntary Rifles-Papua New Guinea Volunteer Rifles Association**

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We meet today, in this quiet moment of tribute and reflection, to honour those 1054 Australians who perished at sea, victims of the sinking of the *SS Montevideo Maru*.

They have no individual headstones. Their memory is held in honour by us all, who follow on. In meeting on this day, 1 July 2022, 80 years on to that tragic day, we do not forget Australia's worst maritime disaster; and we do not let the memory fade of those whose unmarked grave is the unending sea.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, on 7 December 1941, the Imperial Nipponese Army surged south-east through Thailand and into Malaysia and took the surrender of the Allied Garrison of 26,000 troops in Singapore. The Japanese force conquered Indonesia and New Guinea.

To defend the Mandated Territory of New Guinea, a composite military force, LARK FORCE, was raised and deployed to Rabaul, on the island of New Britain. The soldiers and civilian members of the Rabaul Garrison were captured together with more than 200 civilians, Australian planters, missionaries and government officers. Rescue attempts were undertaken from North Queensland, and some women and children and a group of Catholic nuns managed to escape. But hundreds of soldiers and civilians were killed in the jungles, many the victims of bayonet atrocities.

In June 1942, 1054 war prisoners were loaded onto the former Japanese merchant ship, the *MV Montevideo Maru*, to be taken to the island of Hainandao, then called Hainan Island, to either work (it is believed) as slave labourers or to be used as potential exchange prisoners with Australia or the United States. The ship sailed north-west and in contravention to the Laws of War and the Geneva Convention, the *Montevideo Maru* was not marked as a Prisoner-of-War ship. On 1 July, 80 years ago today, the ship was torpedoed off the Island of Luzon. The USS submarine, *USS Sturgeon*, had identified the ship as a Japanese merchant vessel.

All the prisoners of war were drowned.



Seventeen of the Japanese civilian crewmembers of the ship survived the sinking. They escaped in a cutter which was floated off the deck. They landed on Luzon but 11 were immediately killed by Filipino guerrillas fighting on the Allied side. It transpired that five crewmembers, the only survivors, made it back to Japan. In all, 1142 lives were lost in that tragedy. The *Montevideo Maru* is thus a war grave also for the 88 Japanese soldiers and civilian sailors who perished.

Details of the sinking remained unknown, or were suppressed by wartime censorship until after the War. The thousands of Australian families of the victims had held out hopes, for more than three years, that their missing fathers, husbands, sons, brothers and cousins were still alive in prisoner-of-war camps. They first learnt of their deaths in October 1945, by official notice from the

Australian Government. But details remained unknown. The wreck of the sunken *Montevideo Maru*, and its entombed soldiers and civilians, has never been discovered.

In 2003, Mr Yosiaku Yamaji, then 83 years old and a former merchant seaman, was one of the initial 17 Japanese survivors. He gave some first-hand details of what happened. In 2012, the Japanese government gave to the Australian Government, the manifest of the *Montevideo Maru*, with the names of the Australian prisoners who had been embarked at Rabaul. From this manifest, it was possible to erect a block Memorial at the village of Bitapaka, near Rabaul where the *Montevideo Maru* left on this fateful journey.



**Bitapaka Wall of Remembrance Rabaul**

The figure of 1054 dead is a simple statistic. It represents, however, 1054 individual men who died an appalling death, alone in their last minutes. Today, we would wish at least to identify them by their military units:

2/22 Battalion; Gunners of the Anti-Aircraft Battery; 17 Anti-Tank Battery; Engineers and Signallers; Canteen operators; Dental unit; Medical Orderlies; and a Detachment of the 2/10 Field Ambulance.

Twenty-two devout Salvationists, musicians of the Brunswick Citadel Band, a Salvation Army Band in Melbourne, signed up, *en bloc*, as a Regimental Band of the 2/22 Battalion, to act also as stretcher bearers.

Today we memorialise this disaster for two special reasons.

The first is that the family and relatives of those who died, grandchildren and relatives here today, would wish that the service of their relatives, now of a former generation, and their service unto death, should not be forgotten. We will remember them.

Secondly, there has been from the time of the first *Geneva Convention* in 1864, a belief held by civilised nations, that when all attempts to preserve peace have failed, and nations become locked in war, that there is still a basic code of behaviour beneath which honourable people will not descend.

Since 1957, the passage of the *Australian Geneva Convention Act*, every Australian – you and me – today as civilians or as service personnel, are enjoined by law to obey these four Geneva Conventions; and in times of conflict to offer protection to those rendered out of combat, by capture or by wounding, or from disease.

Today, both the Australian and Japanese Nations are enjoined in friendship, now with mutual respect. Both today are enjoined in this Geneva Code; and combatants, rendered helpless by captivity or from injury, are protected by our self-imposed policies and behaviour. This memorialisation today, looks back to that sacrifice of 80 years ago; and sees those tragic events as an acknowledgement of the unchangeable history of three Nations, but sees their aftermath as another step towards the creation of a better world.

**Major General Emeritus Professor John Pearn AO RFD**

**Former Surgeon General, the Australian Defence Force,**

**Patron, New Guinea Volunteer Rifles-Papua New Guinea Volunteer Rifles Ex-Members Association**



**NEW GUINEA VOLUNTEER RIFLES & PAPUA NEW GUINEA VOLUNTEER RIFLES EX-MEMBERS ASSOCIATION**  
**PER ANGSTA AD AUGUSTA (THROUGH TRIALS TO TRIUMPH)**