

***M.V. Montevideo Maru* Memorial Service**
Closure — but not Forgotten

John Pearn

An address on the occasion of the annual Memorial Service to honour the 1053 Australian military and civilian personnel who perished at the sinking of the Japanese prisoner-of-war ship, the *M.V. Montevideo Maru* on 1 July 1942.



Held at the Crypt, The World War 2 Gallery

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We meet today, in this quiet moment of tribute and reflection, to honour those Australians who perished at sea, victims of the sinking of the *M.V. Montevideo Maru*. Those 1053 victims were 845 Australian soldiers and 208 civilians who had been taken prisoner by the Japanese. These Australian servicemen and civilians have no headstone, but from April 2023 the identified wreck of that prison ship is now an identified war grave. Their memory is held in honour by us, who follow on.

In meeting together on this day, 81 years on to the day of that catastrophe, we do not forget Australia's worst maritime disaster, and we do not let the memory fade of those whose grave is the unending sea. The civilians who perished were men and teenagers who had been serving in the Australian civil service and in business in the (then) Territory of Papua and New Guinea; and others who were planters and other workers in the New Guinea Islands. All had been captured by the invading Japanese. The soldiers came from many units. They were servicemen of the 2/22 Battalion; 17 Anti-tank Battery; 1st Independent Commando Company; Gunners of the anti-aircraft battery; Engineers and Signallers; canteen operators; members of the Dental Unit; Medical Orderlies; a Detachment of the 2/10 Field Ambulance and the 22 members of the Regimental Band of the 2/22 Battalion.

The Regimental Band of the 2/22 Battalion comprised 22 Salvationists, musicians of the Brunswick Citadel Band, a part of the Salvation Army's East Corps in Melbourne. Following Pearl Harbour (7 December 1941), as devout but courageous non-combatants, they had enlisted *en bloc* to function as stretcher bearers. Their bandmaster was Mr Arthur Gullidge (1989-1942), a popular and gifted composer of stirring brass band marches and hymns. His music endures as another Memorial to him and his fellow servicemen who perished in that terrible event. Today, the notes of the *Last Post*, played by our Salvation Army colleague, engender a special poignancy in this Memorial Service.

The prison ship was not marked as such, in contravention of the Geneva Conventions. Following its sinking by the United States submarine, *USS Sturgeon*, the men were drowned, trapped in cages below decks. Because of wartime censorship, the families of those who had perished had no knowledge of the fate of their loved ones. This lack of closure was the plight of many thousands of Australian families, whose menfolk were captured or (in some cases) missing in action. In late 1945, families learned that their loved ones had perished, and this brought a partial closure to those who had held out hope of survival throughout the preceding three years.

This Memorial Service today has special significance, as two months ago, on 24 April 2023, the undersea wreck of the *Montevideo Maru* was finally identified at 4200 metres on the seafloor, off the Philippines in the South China Sea. Its discovery has brought a final closure to the lives of surviving relatives and descendants of those 1053 men who, until this year, had no identified grave. When a person is lost, and whether they are alive or dead remains unknown, it is not only relatives and descendants who lack closure, but society more broadly. Thus the identification of what is now an identified war grave, has also brought closure to the many military units whose members perished in that terrible event.

When a person is missing, the parents and partners and relatives of the missing person experience something which psychologists call "ambiguous loss". This term was coined in 1977 by the United States' psychologist, Professor Pauline Boss, in the context of her research into the family dynamics of American soldiers missing in action. Closure is denied to relatives of those missing in war, in natural disasters such as floods and tsunamis; and in individual instances when children are missing, lost, abducted or murdered; and in instances where individuals end their own lives, alone and remote, determined that their body can never be found. Surviving relatives often live for years in the hope that there will be "a knock at the door".

For those surviving, the sadness of “ambiguous loss” can be relieved by closure. Closure exists in several sequential steps.

In the case of shipwreck, when the time interval for potential survival has passed, the fact that there can be no survivors is a first step with the implied certainty of death. However, if the ship is never found, with the implication that there is no identified wreck as a grave, closure for some is not complete. In the case of the *MV Montevideo Maru*, it was not until late 1945 — more than three years after the sinking — that relatives were informed that there was no hope of survival. That first step brought closure for many. Sixty years after the event, in 2003, Mr Yosiaku Yamaji, then 83 years old and a former merchant seaman (one of the 17 Japanese survivors of the *Montevideo Maru*), gave some first-hand details of the torpedoing of the ship and its subsequent sinking. This was a second step in closure for many. In 2012, 70 years after the disaster, the Japanese Government delivered the manifest of the *Montevideo Maru* to the Australian Government. It contained the names of the Australian prisoners who had embarked at Rabaul. This further step brought further closure to many of the surviving relatives – and also to the military units whose members had perished. The final step, in the sequence of events which has led to closure for many, was the identification of the images of the wreck on the sea floor – now an identified gravesite.

Society generally and individuals specifically erect monuments to those missing. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – a moving Memorial in many Nations — is one such example. It is seen as a form of transferred or compensatory closure. In the instance of those 1053 Australians who perished, in the most unthinkable of circumstances, there is now a final closure, honoured in this 2023 Memorial Service.

Closure brings a finality to the story of those who have been lost, formerly without trace. However, closure does not mean forgetfulness. Rather, it gives a focus to our memorialisation.

So today, 81 years on, we remember them as we will continue so to do.

The Author

Major General Professor John Pearn is the active Patron of the Papua New Guinea Volunteer Rifles Ex-Members Association. He served on operational service during Confrontation in 1966, based at Wewak and Vanimo in the Sepik District. He served again in 1967, based both at Port Moresby and Lae and at various places on the Morobe Peninsular. In 1969, he established the Paediatric Unit (University of Queensland) at the new Goroka Hospital; and for several months was the sole paediatrician caring for children in the Eastern Highlands. In 1969 he served as the Training Major for C Company of the Papua New Guinea Volunteer Rifles. During this period also, as a St John Ambulance Divisional Surgeon, he taught first aid classes and issued many St John first aid certificates to Papua New Guineans and to ex-patriate Australians alike. He served again (as the Surgeon General of the Australian Defence Force), in the emergency response to the devastating Sepik tsunami of July 1998; and subsequently on several occasions as the External Examiner to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Papua New Guinea based at Port Moresby. He was awarded the Papua New Guinea Independence Medal “For long and enduring service to Papua New Guinea prior to Independence 1975”. In his civilian life, Professor Pearn is a senior paediatrician, based at the Centre for Children’s Health Research at the Queensland Children’s Hospital, in Brisbane.

