The sinking of the Montevideo Maru

Historical background

In December 1941, Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor and Malaya, launching the Pacific war. On 23 January 1942, as part of the same thrust that was targeting the Philippines and the Netherlands East Indies, they attacked Rabaul, at the northern tip of the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain, and defeated Australian forces there.

About 1400 Australian military personnel were in Rabaul before the attack. Approximately 400 eventually escaped to Australia, while most of the remaining personnel became prisoners of war (POWs). In addition, over 200 civilians in the area were interned. Two attempts were made to transfer these prisoners to Japanese territory. The second group, comprising 60 Australian officers and 19 women, including 8 Army nurses, left Rabaul on 6 July and arrived safely in Japan.

The first group, which was made up of 845 POWs and over 200 civilian internees left Rabaul on 22 June 1942 on the *Montevideo Maru*, a freighter requisitioned by the Japanese navy, for Hainan, off the southern coast of China. On 1 July this vessel, which was not marked as a POW carrier, was torpedoed and sunk by the submarine USS Sturgeon close to Luzon, resulting in the deaths of all prisoners and internees on board.

The deaths on the *Montevideo Maru* were not fully revealed in Australia until after the end of the war, when Major Harold S Williams of the No. 1 Australian Prisoners of War Contact and Enquiry Unit, a pre-war resident of Japan, was sent to Tokyo to investigate this and other POW matters.

Nominal lists of POWs and internees on the Montevideo Maru

In Tokyo in September 1945, Major Williams accessed Japanese files which showed that the *Montevideo Maru* had been carrying Australian prisoners when it was sunk. One of the files included a copy of a 48-page nominal list handwritten in Japanese. He translated the names into English, sent the translation back to Australia in parts, and brought the Japanese list with him when he returned. The current locations of these are unclear.

In early 2012, the National Archives received from the government of Japan a substantial number of original records relating to Australian POWs, including two lists – one typed in English and the other handwritten in Japanese characters – of the 1054 Australians and others (178 non-

commissioned officers, 667 soldiers and 209 civilians) who, reportedly, had boarded the *Montevideo Maru*. Professional historical opinion is that this Japanese list most likely contains the same information as the list found and translated by Major Williams.

Other records

Material on Australians and others taken prisoner or interned in Rabaul, and on the ship's sinking, can be found in Department of External Territories correspondence files.

These include many partial nominal lists of missing military and civilian personnel from Rabaul and elsewhere in New Guinea. Official and legal correspondence concerning particular missing individuals, reports of investigations, press clippings, and government statements on missing personnel and the loss of the *Montevideo Maru*, as well as descriptions of the sinking are also included in the National Archives holdings.

Records relating to the sinking of the Montevideo Maru

Department of External Territories (CA 42)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Civilians detained by Japanese	1942–45	A518, DS16/2/1 part 1
Civilians detained by the Japanese	1945–46	A518, DS16/2/1 part 2
Defence – general – civilians detained by Japanese	1945–46	A518, DS16/2/1 part 3
Territory of New Guinea – civilians detained by Japanese	1946–51	A518, DS16/2/1 part 4
Internees – Australians abroad – civilians reported lost on board SS Montevideo Maru	1945–47	A1066, IC45/55/3/19
Civilian war dead – Territory of Papua New Guinea	1942–44	A7030, 9
Territory of Papua New Guinea – further information including lists about Europeans who died during the invasion or are missing thought dead	1945–48	A7030, 4
Persons lost on Montevideo Maru	circa 1946	A7030, 6

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (CA 5987)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Montevideo Maru – serial name list of prisoners of war and internees who perished	1942–46	A14143, 1

Department of Territories (CA 60)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Information relating to death forms for person who were aboard Japanese prisoner ship Montevideo Maru	1964–68	A452, 1964/7853

Department of the Army, Central Office (CA 36)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Australian POWs reported lost on SS Montevideo Maru	1945	MP727/1, GP25/293
Rabaul Garrison internees lost in Montevideo Maru	1945–46	MP727/1, GP25/334
Montevideo Maru nominal roll – civilian internees lost at sea as result of sinking	1945–46	MP742/1, 255/15/1643
Major Williams – reports from Prisoners of War Information Bureau (PWIB), Tokyo	1945–48	MP742/1, 336/1/116
War crimes during movement at sea – includes nominal rolls of prisoners of war lost on Montevideo Maru	1946–48	MP742/1, 336/1/1614

2nd Echelon, Army Headquarters (CA 2002)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Japanese records relating to prisoner of war deaths, medical records, and other lists (many in Japanese)	1942–46	B3856, 144/1/389
Prisoners of war – far east reports received from Major HS Williams	1945–46	B3856, 144/14/81
Allied prisoners of war transferred from Rabaul	1945–46	B3856, 144/14/84
Report on investigations in Manila and Japan – Australian prisoners of war and civilians by Major HS Williams, No 1 Australian Prisoners of War Contact and Enquiry Unit	1945–46	B3856, 144/14/89
Missing personnel – Rabaul Garrison	1946	B3856, 145/4/196

Records held at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Prisoners of war and internees – report on investigations in Manila and Japan regarding prisoners of war and civilians by Major H S Williams	1945	AWM54, 779/1/1
United States of America versus Hiroshi Tamura – Military Tribunal, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, Tokyo (Volume 5)	1946–48	AWM83, 251

Montevideo Maru website

Visit our Montevideo Maru website to search the nominal roll. You can also read additional material the National Archives holds about many of those on board, or add your stories and photographs to complete the picture of this tragic wartime event.