

Remembering the war in New Guinea

Searching for dad: unsolved mysteries of the fate of Australians missing from New Guinea (Symposium paper)

Panel name: Remembering the war

This page was contributed by Ms Margaret Reeson

There is a significant group of people who have been profoundly affected by the events of the war in New Guinea, yet who never lived in a war zone, were never under attack and who never saw the enemy. In many cases they had never set foot on the islands of New Guinea. These were the women and children of the men who disappeared during the years of war and were never seen again. Their business with the war remains unfinished and to this day there are people who are still, consciously or unconsciously, searching for dad.

As someone who lived in Papua New Guinea from 1961–1978, I had heard the story of the loss of the prison ship, the *Montevideo Maru*, and had seen in Rabaul one of a sequence of memorials to those who were lost. Then in 1988, through a series of circumstances, I met a group of people who had gathered for a memorial service for the missing men of New Guinea. Among them were widows and children of the missing, and colleagues and friends and fellow soldiers from Lark Force. As these people shared their stories, both in the formal setting of the memorial service and later in private conversation, I realised that here was a whole community of people whose war was still not over. It was not only unresolved grief. These people were still trying to solve the mysteries of the war years, even though they feared it was an impossible quest.

Although I did not recognise it at first, I too had begun that search, partly from interest and with a view to writing about their experience, and partly searching on their behalf. My own search would take me into documentary evidence in archives at the Australian War Memorial, here in the Australian Capital Territory and in Melbourne, and into long interviews with people in several states of Australia who had suffered from this particular loss. It has led to two books and a thesis. *Whereabouts unknown*, published 1993, is about six mission women in New Guinea, wives and nurses who lost their husbands and colleagues. Last month, *A very long war: the families who waited* was published by Melbourne University Press and examines the experience of a cross-section of military and civilian families who have been affected by this episode to the present day.

What has it meant to search for father or for husband or brother or mate? What has it meant for the Australian families who have had no finality, no grave, no funeral, no certainty about what really happened?

The searching began for the women during the silent years of the war. In the months immediately after January 1942, some Australian soldiers and civilians straggled home from Rabaul after long and hazardous treks across the unforgiving mountains and jungle of New Britain. As each group arrived, wives of the missing tried to contact them to discover anything they could about men who were still missing. The survivors seldom had any news. Some women were told that their men were on the way, and they kept on hoping. A number of women received a single page letter from their husbands, dated early in 1942, which informed them that they were in a prison camp in the Rabaul area. These letters were delivered, very ingeniously and humanely, by a drop of mailbags over Port Moresby by Japanese aircraft.

After that, nothing. The women and their families waited. There were several subsets of families. There were civilians who had lived in the islands of New Guinea and had been hastily evacuated by ship and plane just before Christmas 1941, the families of public servants, government officers, business people, missionaries, plantation and timber mill managers and workers. Then there were the families of the men of 2/22nd Battalion, Lark Force, both officers and other ranks. Letters began to cross Australia as women built networks among themselves and with the men who had escaped. Clubs were established for mutual support in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane and the women met regularly with the purpose of sharing any crumbs of information about their men which might emerge.

Rumours spread across the country. In time, they learned that the officers of the 2/22nd Battalion had been transported to Japan and were in captivity there. This news gave hope that the other men – soldiers and civilians – were also safely in a camp somewhere. Even so, women heard stories of distressing conditions in prisoner-of-war camps in south-east Asia and remained very anxious about their men. During these years, young children were growing up with the legendary figure of the absent father who would one day come home.

But father did not come home. At the end of the war, when former prisoners from camps across south-east Asia came

home, the 2/22nd's officers came home from Japan and Australian forces re-entered Rabaul, there was no sign of the missing civilians and soldiers. Over a thousand men had disappeared without trace. By the end of October 1945, telegrams were sent to the families of the missing informing them that their men had been lost with the sinking of the prison ship *Montevideo Maru* on 1 July 1942 by the US submarine USS *Sturgeon*. Interestingly, many households greeted this news with cynicism and uncertainty. Many women did not believe it. There were still no witnesses, no remains, no grave.

The rumours began again: was there really a ship, or was that a deception? How could you be sure which men went onboard which ship? What if, as some suggested, the men were loaded on the ship and then massacred at sea? Was the story of a ship torpedoed by a US submarine an elaborate device to provide a somehow softer version of their end compared to the possibility of torture, executions or painful and lonely death of disease on a jungle track while trying to escape? Was their own government trying to hide something?

So the searches began and have continued ever since. The widows, then their children as they matured, and these days the grandchildren, have tried to discover the truth.

Why has it been so hard to discover the truth? Or to trust the "truth" that has been offered? There are a number of reasons.

First, parts of the puzzle were held by people scattered around the world. For years no one could see the whole picture and even now there may be missing pieces. The Australian officers saw the other ranks and civilian men marched out of camp late in June 1942 and did not see them again. The Chinese and New Guinean labourers saw Australian men they knew board a ship in Simpson Harbour, but did not know where it was heading. The US Navy knew their submarine had sunk a large Japanese vessel, and when and where, but not which one. The Australian War Memorial has a copy of the log recording the chase and its result. The Japanese ship owners knew that their ship was lost. A list of names of prisoners from Rabaul existed in the Japanese POW Information Bureau. The Australian authorities knew the names of some, but not all of those who probably had been killed at Tol and Waitavolo, but did not release those names. Until late-1945 no one held all the parts of the puzzle together. The women who waited were not the only ones in the dark.

Second, some suspected a deliberate cover-up by the Australian government. It was felt by a number of families that the Australian authorities snatched at the possibility that a great many Australians were lost with the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* as a useful reason to offer for the loss of *all* missing Australians. There has been continuing bitterness and anger toward the Australian government of the day. This is where most blame has been laid. When family members were asked where their anger was directed in the years after the war, it was interesting that few blamed the US submariners ("they didn't know who was on board", it was said, or "there should have been a Red Cross sign on the ship to warn them"). Some blamed the Japanese military. But most bitterness has been directed at the Australian authorities, both military and civil. The military authorities should never have sent Lark Force and the other small groups of naval, air force and Independent Company men to New Guinea in the first place, they say. As for the civilians, why were at least the older men not given the chance to be evacuated while there was still time? Because they believe that they have been badly misused by the errors of judgement of their government, many of the families of the missing still suspect that the government authorities had something to hide. If that was true, they suggest, then any pronouncements that they made on the fate of the missing should be viewed with a degree of scepticism. Can they be trusted?

Third, some information was deliberately placed under embargo. When a handful of men who had survived the massacres at Tol and Waitavolo plantations finally arrived back in Australia, their evidence was gathered. This material was combined with all other information collected during the war in the "Report on Japanese atrocities and breaches of rules of warfare" prepared by Justice William Webb and completed in 1944. As was appropriate, this report was kept secret for the sake of national security and with the intention of protecting families from the terrible detail of what had happened to some of the missing. Fragments of this information appeared in the press, however. The horrifying thing about this was that every example of inhumanity or cruelty was described in detail, but without the names of victims or clues about where these incidents had taken place. The effect of this was that family members whose men remained missing filled in the blanks for themselves, imagining their son or husband in every possible situation of pain and despair. It is possible today to read the detail of the Webb Report in the Australian War Memorial archives, but the names of victims have been neatly and literally sliced from the text with a razor blade. This has been done with good intentions – to protect the families – but I would challenge this. It seems to me that families would deal better with the truth than with haunting mystery. Those who do not *want* to know will not go searching in a document like that. And those who have nightmares about the unthinkable could be reassured that in fact, it was *not* their husband or father who suffered this particular end.

Fourth, there were lists of names of men said to have been on the *Montevideo Maru*, but the lists were inconclusive. The first references to lists of names of those who later disappeared come from the notes that Rabaul journalist Gordon Thomas kept in captivity. He described the occasion in May 1942 when he was taken to the prison camp at Malaguna near

Rabaul for a camp muster. All those Australians and others present that day were listed by name, age, occupation, region and place of origin. Immediately after the war, Captain H.S. Williams was sent to Japan to try to discover any news about the missing Australians. The records of the Japanese Prisoner of War Information Bureau had been hastily transferred out of Tokyo because of serious bombing in 1945 and were now in a state of confusion. However, Williams found documents, which had been transliterated into Japanese, which listed men of the 2/22nd Bn and civilians of New Guinea.

But were those names the names of men who had been on board the *Montevideo Maru*, or simply of those who had been in camp when the list was made in May 1942? It seemed that some names had been added much later, including names of men who were known to have been in New Ireland earlier in 1942. Plausible stories about subsets of men on the list were told. The list of civilians, in particular, created more puzzles than solutions. Into the 1950s, many versions of lists of the missing men of New Guinea were produced. In the course of research, I saw at least thirteen versions. And yet there was never enough firm evidence to state that those listed had met their end in a way which could be identified and with the benefit of witnesses. Family members who continue to search for information say, "His name was on the list", but the question remains: which list? How reliable is it? What does the list really tell us?

Fifth, postwar investigations were not conclusive. It was not lack of will or energy on the part of those Australian troops and officers who were sent to investigate the possible whereabouts of the missing. From late in 1945 until at least 1950, teams of people did their best to find answers. One group served in the War Crimes trials in Rabaul and Tokyo, seeking through legal processes to uncover the truth. This was not an easy task as they were sometimes given alternative versions of events and cases were re-opened years later. Another group worked to search for human remains and to establish identity where possible. This was a nightmare task as human remains were scattered in isolated jungle settings, or hidden under high kunai grass. Burial sites had been relocated. One cemetery location had been bombed by the Allies, with the result that any remains were fragmentary and scattered. Caskets of bones or ashes were unlabelled or mixed and there were discrepancies between lists of names and numbers of caskets. There was evidence of executions and death from disease among people of other nationalities and small groups of Australians. But even then, there was no evidence of the remains of over a thousand missing men, although rumours about the existence of a mass grave have continued to the present day. An officer of the Australian War Graves Unit wrote in 1949, "It is unlikely that we will ever know what happened to them". In his final report in 1950, Lt Col Houghton stated that despite all their efforts they had not found any clue to what had happened to the men who had boarded the *Montevideo Maru*.

Sixth, silence within the family reduced opportunities for the next generation to learn the story. The children of the missing, who now near 60 years of age, have searched for their father within their own family. In some cases, they have been able to discuss their father with their mother, learning of character, interests and background. However, in many households, the next generation reports that their mother found it almost impossible to speak of the missing man. With the passing of the years, and the maturing of the grandchildren of the missing, there seems to be a growing urgency among the people of the next generations to learn everything they can about father – medical history, personality, interests, family of origin.

Seventh, family members have been limited in their search, as they have not known where to look. Although considerable material has been written about the events in New Guinea during the war, many families have not looked in official war histories. Many have relied on news passed along through letters or personal contacts, or more "popular" books written by coastwatchers and those who escaped. The difficulty is that these writers did not have much information to offer, and what they did know was often confined to their own escape experience. There are large amounts of archival material available, but much of it may seem inaccessible or overwhelming in volume and detail.

Finally, unsubstantiated rumours are still current among this community and people still try to solve the mysteries. Are any of the stories that continue to circulate about the mystery of the missing men from Rabaul able to be proved? I doubt it. Nor can they be disproved. This week I received a long letter from someone who had just read *A very long war*. He writes again the possibility that, although a thousand and more men were loaded on to a ship in Simpson Harbour, Rabaul in 1942, "I now firmly believe that at the time the United States submarine even sighted the *Montevideo Maru*, not a single prisoner remained on the vessel – either alive or deceased". He based this on documents he saw some years ago in the United Kingdom in which a Japanese signalman was reported to say that he had made friends with the Australians in Rabaul and had been fearful for them when they were sent away by sea. Unfortunately, my correspondent cannot remember where he has filed this document. A woman who grew up in New Britain writes bitterly this month that her own view – that the story of a torpedoed ship was a "sick fairy tale" – has been ignored.

Why do people still search for dad up to fifty years later?

This question is still current and alive for a large number of Australian families. The events of 1942 still shape attitudes and understandings in the people I met and interviewed. Elderly women and their children told their stories with tears. This is very immediate stuff. Some brief glimpses of why this remains so important:

- Without definite answers, many have faced, and some still face, legal obstacles. Widows were afraid to remarry in case

their husband was not dead after all. With no formal death certificates for years, women were delayed in being able to access insurance and property rights. With the loss of all their legal documents during the war and the continuing uncertainties, former civilians found themselves without proof of citizenship as Australians as recently as the 1980s.

- The uncertainty affects physical and psychological health. It may be worth a serious study being done of the effect on health for families of people who remain missing. On anecdotal evidence alone it would seem that this group, including the children, have suffered an unusual degree of psychological and physical ill health. Some suggested that they had experienced post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Unresolved grief can be very debilitating. People have tried to deal with their grief in many ways, including establishing memorials. One family hired an undertaker and had an entire funeral – hearse, casket, flowers and many tears for a father who had vanished – and they did it in about 1985 for a man last seen in 1942.
- For the sake of children and grandchildren, they seek to capture in their writing the essence of the man who was lost to their family. At least twelve of the families I contacted have been writing about father, in one form or another.
- The sense of something significant missing from their family life, expressed in going on pilgrimages to sites related to their father. One woman returned to a mission village near Rabaul just two years ago and was amazed to meet people who remembered her parents – they sang in a choir named for her dad, and displayed the work of a now nationwide women’s organisation begun by her mother. This was a most moving experience for her.
- There is a sense in which this episode of the war years is little known in Australia and those for whom it is profoundly important still seek ways to have it marked.
- This is part of a wider search for meaning when people are faced with the large questions of human grief and suffering.
- It has been important to have listened to the stories and shared the tears. Many women said, “This is the first time I have talked about this in any depth.” The mysteries of those years will probably never be revealed. And yet to listen and record the story has been part of a long process. Several people have said to me, “Being able to share my story had been part of my healing.”

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