**The Rabaul & Montevideo Maru National Memorial, Canberra**

In 2008 Andrea Williams, the editor of ***Una Voce***, raised the unresolved issue for public recognition of the victims of the Japanese invasion of Rabaul and New Guinea islands, including the sinking of the MV Montevideo Maru (MVM), with the new PNGAA president Keith Jackson. Andrea had lost her civilian grandfather and an uncle on the MVM. Keith responded by setting up an informal MVM Committee in early 2009 to work towards achieving Commonwealth Government recognition for these tragic events. It was proposed to submit a major submission to the Government late 2009.

About this time our NGVR & PNGVR Association (PNGVR) and Papua New Guinea Association of Australia (PNGAA) member, Clive Troy, who had a connection with the Philippines suggested a plaque for the MVM victims be placed on the US Naval Hellship’s Memorial at Subic Bay, near Manila. This site is only a couple of hundreds of kilometres from where the MVM was sunk by friendly fire early morning 1 July 1942.

PNGAA ‘s MVM Committee coordinated the arrangement with Clive Troy in the Philippines. PNGVR member Phil Ainsworth was a member of the Committee. A design and wording were agreed, and a memorial was installed and dedicated on the 67th Anniversary of the MVM sinking, 1 July 2009. The Australian Ambassador to the Philippines, His Excellency Rod Smith, was the keynote speaker and Phil Ainsworth dedicated the memorial. Andrea Williams spoke passionately about the tragedies. A dozen or so association members, several of whom would become committee members of the Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Society (R&MVM) attended. The memorial was financed by PNGAA, PNGVR and Lark Force -2/22Bn Association, each contributing several thousand dollars, with Clive Troy arranging the installation and dedication service from the Philippines.

The major submission lodged November 2009 was accepted in its entirety by the Commonwealth Government.

On 21 June 2010 both Houses of Parliament resolved to recognise the sacrifices of the victims of these events and express the gratitude of the Australian nation to the service personnel and civilians in Rabaul and the New Guinea Islands for their service in the defence of Australia during WWII; thank the families of the men lost through their sacrifices; acknowledge the disruption to the families and extend condolences to the loved ones for their loss. Ministerial statements were delivered by the Hon Alan Griffin MP, Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and Minister for Defence personnel, and the Hon Louise Markus, Shadow Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, with a private members motion in the evening. A multi-partisan group of speakers supported the resolution: Senator Anne McEwen (SA), Catherine King (VIC), Stephen Ciobo (QLD), Bruce Scott (QLD), John Murphy (NSW) and Bob Katter (QLD). The Government also granted $100,000 to start a public subscription for a National Memorial to honour the victims. 350 people including many members of PNGVR and PNGAA attended Parliament to witness this historic and first public recognition of the Rabaul and Montevideo Maru tragedies and subsequent loss of life.

The R&MVM Society was incorporated immediately after with Keith Jackson, President, and Hon Peter Garrett AM, Patron. In February 2010, Patron Kim Beasley AC was posted to Washington as Australia’s Ambassador and Minister Hon Peter Garrett accepted the Patronage of the Society. Kim Beasley and Peter Garratt had both lost relatives on the MVM. Members included et al, Andrea Williams, Clive Troy, Phil Ainsworth, Don Hook, Bob Lawrence, Liz Thurston, Max Uechtritz, Rod Miller, Chris Diercke, Albert Speer MBE, ‘Hooky’ Philip Street, and, later, Major Kelvin Alley, Lindsay Cox and Kurt Diercke. Phil Ainsworth was appointed to coordinate fund raising, which started immediately.

In October 2010 a successful centennial party for Rabaul was held as a memorial fund raiser in the NGVR Memorial Museum grounds, Wacol, Brisbane. PNGVR in association with PNGAA organised an Australian-wide raffle for funds for the proposed national memorial. In late 2010/early 2011 agreement was reached with the Australian War Memorial (AWM), Canberra, for the location of the memorial. It was to be installed within the award-winning east precinct with a commanding view over Anzac Avenue and contiguous to the Australian War Memorial (AWM) restaurant’s courtyard.

Keith Jackson resigned as President of the R&MVM Society January 2011 and Phil Ainsworth assumed the presidency with the other positions remaining unchanged. A target date for the dedication was set for the 70th Anniversary of the sinking, 1 July 2012. This short deadline to raise the funds and complete the project was perceived to be necessary to provide some closure, in their lifetimes, for the aged and increasingly fragile victim’s family members. The issues raised with a short deadline were overcome through concentrated effort and dedication of those involved in the project’s conceptualization, budgeting, commissioning, construction and installation, as well as organising the necessary ceremonies.

In partnership with the AWM, an Australian-wide design competition ensued and noted Melbourne sculptor James Parrett was commissioned to build and install the Rabaul and Montevideo Memorial.

In 2011 the 69th Anniversary of these events was commemorated at a National Press Club luncheon with Patron, Minister Peter Garrett AM, being the keynote speaker, and including guest speakers NGVR/PNGVR Patron, Major General John Pearn, Papua New Guinea High Commissioner Charles Lepani and General Peter Cosgrove. With thanks to Don Hook, veteran journalist Paul Lockyer was MC. The luncheon was followed by a memorial service at Duntroon Chapel attended by His Excellency Maj-Gen Michael Jeffery and Mrs Jeffery. Many PNGVR and PNGAA members attended both events.

Later that year the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Peter O’Neill, accompanied by PNG High Commissioner to Australia, Charles Lepani, visited the proposed site of the memorial and presented the Society with a cheque for $100,000.  Fund raising and the preparation for a 2012 dedication of the National Memorial proceeded with a flurry. A total of $500,000 was raised, $100,000 each from the governments of Australia and Papua New Guinea, the remainder through subscriptions and donations from Australian companies, organisations, individuals and relatives of the victims.

The many generous volunteers involved in the project received no recompense for expenses including their time, airfares, accommodation, meals, office expenses and supplies etc. The estimated value of these in-kind donations is between $300,000 and $400,000. Thus, the total expended on the project is between $800,000 to $900,000.

In March 2012, the Japanese Government unexpectedly presented its Prisoner of War documentation to the Australian Government. These documents included a MVM list which was proven to be similar, if not a copy, of the document from which the original list (which later went missing and added to controversy) was produced late 1945 by Major Williams. The National Archives of Australia (NAA) Office had the list translated and publicly presented the translated list just prior to the dedication commemoration. Harumi Sakaguchi, a Japanese national working with NAA, assisted in the authenticity of this list.

The 70th Anniversary of the sinking of the Montevideo Maru, together with those lost in the New Guinea islands, was commemorated at a hotel luncheon followed by an onsite dedication service at the AWM next day. The luncheon was held on 30 June 2012 and attended by 640 people. The keynote speaker was the Chief of Army, Lt-General David Morrison and Society President Phil Ainsworth followed with a review of the work and future of the R&MVM Society. PNGVR and RMvM committee member Don Hook organised for media personality, Ray Martin, to be MC.

On a blustery, cool, wet day of 1 July 2012, the Memorial Dedication Service was held in the nearby open AWM restaurant courtyard. The R&MVM National Memorial could be viewed on the rise in front. Over 1,700 people including government ministers, senior bureaucrats, military and civilian leaders, representatives of commercial and not for profit organisations, relatives and friends of victims and members of ours and kindred organisations attended. Norm Furness, President 2/22 Bn and an escapee from Rabaul, and Lorna Johnston, an army nurse and survivor from the Rabaul invasion, were also present. Other survivors attending included Len Wolfe of Fortress Signallers, Lionel Veale of the 1 Independent Company and Hugh Ward of Fortress Engineers who missed the ship taking the men to Rabaul due to illness. Unfortunately Lawrence Sawford, ex Lark Force, had to cancel just before the event, as did Matt Foley. Other special guests included Dr Rowley Richards, ex 8 Div Malaya and Singapore, and Life President of the 2/15th Field Regiment Association, who spent time in POW camps in Changi, Burma and Japan, and ‘Ossie’ Osborne who was with the 2/6th Independent Commando Company.

The Governor General, Her Excellency Quentin Bryce was the keynote speaker. She was followed by other dignitaries including RMvM Patron, Peter Garrett AM; Rear Admiral Ken Doolan, Chairman of Council AWM and President of the RSL; President of the RMvM Society Phil Ainsworth; President of the 2/22nd Lark Force Assocation, Norm Furness, representing the soldiers; and Margaret Henderson, representing the civilians. All who wished to do so placed wreaths, flowers and mementoes at the foot of the stairway to the monument. The Salvation Army Melbourne City Band played Sgt Arthur Gullidge’s music and a special musical composition titled ‘Sons of Australia’, composed by Prisoners-of-War interned in the Ramale Prisoner of War Camp, New Britain, (located in an inhospitable valley near Kokopo) following their liberation by an Australian Army party, led by Major Charles Dowson Bates, in September 1945. A fly-past by1942-era aircraft, a black Catalina flying boat, a Wirraway fighter and a Hudson Bomber completed the service. The Salvation Army generously provided warming refreshments following the service.

For those who did not attend or who wish to see and hear these moving services, a video of both services, in their entirety, is available. It is titled ***70th Anniversary Commemorative Events of the Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Tragedy*** and is available from the Wacol Museum or through PNGAA. Details for acquiring a copy are available elsewhere on this website.

While 36 NGVR soldiers were officially lost on the Montevideo Maru, many more were killed at the time of the invasion and Tol massacre or died from sickness, disease and starvation during their attempted escape. The assistance given by NG mainland NGVR soldiers manning the NGVR/Harris’ Navy was legendary. It is estimated that of the 80 called up NGVR, A Company soldiers, 56 were killed or died, a 70% casualty rate within a few months.

PNGVR’s ongoing contribution to promoting public recognition of the sacrifice of civilian and military victims during the Japanese invasion of Rabaul, the New Guinea Islands and its aftermath, is highly commendable. This involved: initially, placing a commemorative plaque in the Brisbane Cenotaph in 1994 and holding annual services there since; assisting in organising and participating in the Subic Bay, Philippines Hell-ships Memorial in 2009; and the help and support given in arranging the Canberra National Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Memorial.

Our PNGVR Museum at Wacol, Brisbane was established to commemorate the service of NGVR soldiers and be a memorial for those lost during the Pacific War. A museum display, supported by unique memorabilia, graphically describes the MVM tragedy while another explains the Japanese invasion of Rabaul, New Guinea islands and aftermath. PNGVR’s book ***Keepers of the Gate*** contains stories by NGVR soldiers Norm Fisher, Leo Kam On, Frank Wilson, Alfred Robinson and Leslie Stokie about their survival after the Rabaul invasion.

PNGVR assists and strongly supports PNGAA’s ongoing promotional Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Memorial Educational Project to ensure the story remains a focal point for Australians. PNGAA has made available an integrated teaching package for teachers to introduce the Pacific War history to secondary students through Australia’s involvement in PNG. The program has been developed by teachers to complement the Australian History curriculum. Emphasis is placed on the little-known Japanese invasion of Rabaul and the New Guinea islands and tragic events such as the sinking of MVM. Teachers throughout Australia are encouraged to use this outstanding resource which includes lesson plans, background notes, worksheets, resources and easy access to an electronic 15-minute version of the DVD ‘Some Came Home’, all to be used in conjunction or separately. The program can be taught in one or two lessons and is available at: <http://www.memorial.org.au/Education/index.htm>

In 2017 the History Teachers Association of Australia held its annual conference in Brisbane and, as part of this, PNGAA sponsored a display table and a speaker/workshop to talk about the Rabaul and Montevideo Maru disaster, its related education program and Australia’s PNG involvement since the 1880’s. As part of this 2017 Brisbane workshop, the PNGVR co-hosted a contingent of teachers who visited our Museum as part of this programme to learn more about the Montevideo Maru, the Tol Massacre, the NGVR, those who escaped and the lives of those civilians who remained.

The Association can be justly proud of its past and ongoing achievement and community spirit.

**Phil Ainsworth, October 2019**