

# **SUNK EN ROUTE TO FREEDOM**

New Evidence Linking the Movement of the  
Montevideo Maru with Internee Exchanges  
Between Japan and Australia

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When the Japanese transport ship *Montevideo Maru* was sunk just to the northwest of the Philippines on the 1st of July 1942, a total of 1053 captured Australian servicemen and civilians lost their lives. These men were being shipped from Japanese occupied Rabaul, in what had been the Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea, to the Japanese-occupied territory of Hainan Island, China.

Professor Hank Nelson has stated:

The sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* was the greatest disaster at sea ever suffered by Australians.<sup>1</sup>

If this is the case, then why is so little known about this loss today? Why do so many questions surrounding the deaths of these men remain unanswered, 67 years on? This paper is intended to provide some answers to these questions.

At the end of World War II, when calls were made for an Inquiry into the loss of the Rabaul men, the official Chifley Government response, given by the Minister for Transport and External Territories, E. J. Ward was:

The whole of the facts associated with the occupation of the Rabaul area are known to the Government, which considers that a further inquiry is therefore unnecessary.<sup>2</sup>

With the declassification of Australian wartime archives, we now know this to be a true statement, as the Chifley Government was aware, post-war, of all of the facts associated with the loss of Rabaul. This knowledge included the loss of the men captured there, aboard the *Montevideo Maru*. Evidence presented below suggests that the movement of the *Montevideo Maru* was associated with the exchange of Japanese and Allied internees in 1942. The exchange had been classified as "Secret" during the war and had come under the 30-year non-disclosure rule post-war. Up until now, little has been written about what occurred in the negotiations that led to the release of 871 Japanese for the return of only 30 Australians in 1942.

Due to the Government's refusal to hold an inquiry into the loss of the Rabaul men, circumstances that probably influenced the Japanese to send the civilians to Hainan aboard the *Montevideo Maru* were never fully investigated, and although historians have written of the exchange none have ever researched them in relation to the sailing of the *Montevideo Maru* or the events in Rabaul that occurred before its sailing. This lack of information about what occurred is reflected in the two official histories written in 1957 and 1971, before the declassification of the relevant files. Although the official historians were not restricted by the 30-year non-disclosure rule they were possibly unaware of the exchanges having taken place and would have no reason to investigate them in connection with the sailing of the *Montevideo Maru*. Although there is no direct evidence of any connection between the events in Rabaul, the circumstantial evidence in the Exchange files supports the contention that the Rabaul men were being moved into a zone, that had been negotiated with the Japanese for the exchange of civilian internees. In line with long-established diplomatic principles, negotiations for the exchange of internees between the Japanese Empire and the Allied Powers had begun soon after the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941.

In early January 1942 Japanese aircraft started attacking Rabaul. On 15 January 1942, the Acting Administrator, Harold Page, wrote to Canberra requesting that the remaining civilians be evacuated from Rabaul. Canberra's delay in replying sealed the fate of the civilian men who were captured when the Japanese invaded.

On 16 January 1942, a cable from the British Minister in Buenos Aires stated:

Japanese official in charge of evacuation has asked Argentine representative Tokyo whether the Australian Government would name someplace near its territory to disembark Australian officials and pick up Japanese officials; ship proceeding after to Africa (I presume Lourenco Marques) with other evacuated persons.<sup>3</sup>

In the reply to the Japanese cable, drafted by the Department of External Affairs, Callo (Peru) was nominated as a suitable port for the exchange to take place. It suggested that if the Japanese objected to this location the only other neutral place in the vicinity of Australia was Portuguese Timor, but it was undesirable to use this location due to defence security reasons. Before this cable was sent, however, events overtook the negotiations. At a U.S.-led conference in Rio de Janeiro, a resolution was passed recommending the severance of all diplomatic and economic ties between South American countries and the Axis powers. This meant that Callo was no longer a neutral port.<sup>4</sup>

On 21 February 1942, in a circular to the Minister of External Affairs, the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs sought agreement on the United States Government proposal that the port of Lourenco Marques be used for the exchange.<sup>5</sup> In an undated draft reply kept in the files (but apparently never sent) an Australian official suggested that:

His Majesty's Government in the Commonwealth of Australia desires that the exchange might, so far as it is concerned, be affected in Dilli, which is still nominally neutral territory, or failing that Rabaul.<sup>6</sup>

On a report written to the Minister of the External Affairs two days later, there is a handwritten note which again suggests Rabaul be considered for the exchange:

1. Why not neg. exchange at Dilli [crossed out] or Rabaul
2. Why not start with diplomatic Reps. Only!

Col Hodgson says this matter can be taken no further by Department Cabinet decision required.<sup>7</sup>

It seems odd that any official within the Department of External Affairs would be suggesting the port of Rabaul for the exchange, as it had been captured by the Japanese one month earlier.

In February 1942, Prime Minister John Curtin promised the Australian Trade Commissioner in Singapore, Vivian Bowden, that if he were to stay at his post and keep reporting Japanese movements<sup>8</sup>, the Government would insist on his inclusion in the exchange that was being negotiated. Contrary to expectations in Canberra, on the day preceding the fall of Singapore, Bowden took the opportunity to escape. Unfortunately, this led to Bowden's capture at sea and subsequent murder on Bangka Island after he had tried to assert his diplomatic status and thus aggrieved a Japanese guard. (Until 1945, the Australian Government remained unaware of

Bowden's fate.) As the Japanese advanced, another Australian official, David Ross, was captured on Timor. As the internee exchange negotiations continued, the Australian Government insisted on the inclusion of these two men in the exchange.

When the Japanese first offered an internee exchange, the Australian Army had called upon an officer whose name later became closely associated with the *Montevideo Maru*. Captain Harold S. Williams had been a businessman in Japan before the war and could speak Japanese fluently. He joined the Directorate of Prisoners of War and Internees where his knowledge of Japanese psychology was considered a great asset during the exchange negotiations.<sup>9</sup>

Early in the war, when negotiations for the exchange of internees commenced, every effort was made to induce the Japanese to furnish a central or detailed address for Imperial prisoner's mail. In a cable dated 11 April 1942 it was stated:

Until such an address is furnished the British Post Office will not accept mails for personnel in Japanese hands. The Imperial Prisoners of War Committee has unanimously agreed that unless Diplomatic ship from Japan carries correspondence from Imperial Prisoners of War and British internees, mail for Japan will not be shipped, but disposed of under G.P.O. arrangements.<sup>10</sup>

Possibly because of this demand by the British, representations were made by the Japanese Government to allow the internees held in Australia to write letters home.<sup>11</sup> The Australian Government agreed, with a reciprocal demand that the Australian prisoners held in Rabaul be allowed to write letters home. It is not yet known through which channels this exchange of letters was arranged, but due to the time frame, and the fact that Australia received the letters via an airdrop over Port Moresby on 28 April 1942, it is conceivable that Australia had dropped their letters over Rabaul.<sup>12</sup>

The Curtin Government assumed that the Japanese were requesting these letters to confirm the status of these internees. However, the Japanese probably needed the names of the authors of these letters to identify who was interned in Australia. In reply to a British cablegram that stated that no further lists of Japanese internees be forwarded to the International Red Cross or Protective Power, a cable dated 10 June 1942 sent by the Australian Department of External Affairs to the Minister for the Netherlands in London asked:

Question arises whether Netherlands Government considers names of Japanese internees from Netherlands East Indies should be communicated. Glad if you would take up and advise.<sup>13</sup>

So, it would appear that up until 10 June no list of internees from the Netherlands East Indies had been sent.

The Japanese internees who had been living in areas, such as the Netherlands East Indies, and Malaya for many years prior to the war, were highly valued for their knowledge of the raw materials and the local languages. These expatriates were urgently needed to help run the captured rubber plantations, oil fields, and tin mines, all of which were essential to the Japanese war effort.

Historian Margaret Bevedge in her book *Behind Barbed Wire* noted:

Surprisingly, given the state of the war, 528 internees were entrained [from Loveday camp] for Melbourne on 15 August 1942, on their way to Japan as part of a repatriation exchange. It seems contradictory that Australia, with all its own local Japanese interned, should allow this large group to be returned, particularly as they had knowledge of the near North from which the Japanese military forces were at that very moment basing their attacks on Australia. Most of those repatriated were nominated by name from Japan, and Loveday officers believed that “they were all connected with the production of rubber in Malaya and other islands”. Many others with similar occupations were also repatriated from Tatura, but not all those described as “rubber estate” employees were included.

While the consular staff and the servicemen’s ashes went in conformity to international law, the internees would logically be exchanged for some valuable consideration, but little of value came to Australia. Whether the economic value of these Japanese internees to the enemy outweighed the manpower and related costs in keeping them, is hard to assess, but Australia had tended to keep Germans with “skills likely to be useful to the enemy”. When the Dutch decided that their internees were to be exchanged, they would have had their own interests in mind. The NEI authorities could well have been pressed by considerations of treatment of Dutch in both Japanese and German control. The British were afraid in December 1941 that under such pressure the NEI authorities would repatriate 400 dangerous Germans from a camp in Sumatra, and arranged for them to be sent to India.<sup>14</sup>

In a 1951 history document written for the Department of Prisoners of War and Internees, there is a garbled reference to the letter drop:

Special letters from Japanese internees.

24. Following upon representations from the Japanese Government in 1942 and in view of the fact that the proposal meant recognition of status of internees, all Japanese internees of 21 years and over held in Australia were each permitted to lodge for transmission to Japan or Japanese Occupied Territory one letter of 23 lines. Careful scrutiny of these letters resulted in little of value being found although a fairly large percentage of the internees took advantage of the approval. The arrangement was a reciprocal one under which a number of letters from Australians were received. These were dropped in Rabaul by air and numbered 395. It was apparent on examination that they were written on the condition that all references to conditions of captivity were favourable.

The author seems to have confused Rabaul with Port Moresby<sup>15</sup>, although this confusion would be understandable if the letters written by the Japanese internees in Australia had indeed been dropped over Rabaul.

The history document also has a short report on the 1942 exchange, which gives minimal detail about what occurred:

General problems arose regarding accommodation on vessels for these persons, the return of guard personnel, and other attendant matters. It is not proper to deal with those in this report.<sup>16</sup>

Although the historian thought it improper to report the problems of the first exchange, strangely he went on to describe in detail the problems associated with the negotiations for the second exchange (proposed in 1943, but never brought to fruition).

The Australian government was exploring all avenues to gain information about the men in Rabaul. Further evidence of this interest is contained in an Advisory War Council Minute dated 1 April 1942, quoting “advice received from Japanese sources” about the prisoners in Rabaul:

Approximately 1,300 troops were at Rabaul at the time of the Japanese attack: of these 700 were taken prisoner or surrendered, according to advice from Japanese sources, 300 were in hospital or were casualties, and 160 had just been rescued. This left 140 not accounted for. He thought that most, if not all of these, would be casualties.<sup>17</sup>

How this advice was received is unknown, but the unusual wording about casualties suggests that it was possibly translated from Japanese to English. This information was possibly received via the translation of decrypted messages as the Japanese codes had been broken early in the war.

With the internee letters to establish who was held in Australia, the Japanese forwarded a list of 385 names of non-official internees that they wanted to include in the exchange.<sup>18</sup> Negotiations continued, with the Australian Government again demanding the inclusion of Bowden and Ross. The Japanese reply arrived via the British negotiators on 3 May:

Japanese Government reply that they cannot accept the Commonwealth Government’s request for Bowden and Ross in exchange arrangements. They justify refusal on grounds that scheme for exchange of official personnel in Singapore and Timor was not contemplated in original negotiations.<sup>19</sup>

Curtin telegraphed Evatt, the Australian Minister for External Affairs in London:

Position is, so far as Australia is concerned, that if the scheme as now proposed is accepted, we would be repatriating to Japan all Japanese non-officials interned in Australia totalling 1,120 and all diplomatic and consular staff totalling 23. In return, Japan would repatriate to Australia: personnel of Australian Legation, Tokyo, totalling 8, and probably a portion only of Australian nationals in Japan, total number of whom is believed to be less than 45. We think that reasonable arrangement in view of large disparity of numbers both officials and non-officials would be for the Japanese to include Bowden and staff of 2 as well as Ross.<sup>20</sup>

In his response of 13 May 1942, Evatt stated:

My own opinion is-

(1) That we should not yield over Bowden and Ross under any circumstances, even if it means our negotiating a new and separate agreement with Japan:

(a) We are bound in honour to them to insist on their inclusion in any scheme of exchange;

(b) Both men will have information about the Japanese which will be invaluable to us.

(2) I also think highly dangerous to return from Australia 1120 internees many of whom will be able to imperil our security during the critical period of war.<sup>21</sup>

Three days later, Curtin's response to the British who were negotiating with the Japanese was direct. There would be no exchange without the inclusion of Bowden and Ross<sup>22</sup>. Evatt's suggestion to Curtin that a separate exchange could be negotiated interestingly anticipates a two-part exchange later offered by the Japanese in the negotiations.

Unbeknown to Curtin, the British Foreign Office received from the Swiss Legation in London the final Japanese proposals for the exchange on 14 May, among which was:

other non-officials who desire to be repatriated shall be carried on a subsequent voyage <sup>23</sup>

At about this time in Rabaul, the prisoners were all brought together at the old Lark Force military camp for a roll call, with the civilians and military being listed separately. It was also at this point that the Japanese Army handed the responsibility of the prisoners to the Japanese Navy. Gordon Thomas, the captured Editor of the *Rabaul Times*, wrote in his diary about the roll call and noted a conversation with the Deputy Administrator Harold Page:

Speaking to a senior Government official I learned that the Tol affair was being discussed in the House of Representatives and Curtin was "going to do something about it." <sup>24</sup>

Interned civilian nurse Joyce Oldroyd-Harris also noted in her diary that the first letters had reached Australia along with news of the Japanese massacre of Australian POWs at Tol Plantation:

5th June - allowed to write home. Word that first batch letters rec. sth.  
[i.e. "Received South"- euphemism for "received in Australia". The reference to writing home on the 5th of June refers to a subsequent batch of internee letters that were probably not delivered, although some letters were indeed discovered in Port Moresby after this date, see below.]

News of service - requested to attend in uniform Army & Civil nurses.

News of Tol incident rec. sth. <sup>25</sup>

How Page and Oldroyd-Harris, both isolated internees, would have received this accurate information about Australia is unclear, but one possibility is that the captured signallers of Lark force were repairing radios for the Japanese. Possibly they were receiving news of these events from broadcasts they received. On the 5th of June, the Japanese officer in command of prisoners of war, along with the Naval Intelligence section, arrived at Vunapope mission, where Oldroyd-Harris was interned, for the dedication of a memorial to the Australians that had died during the invasion of Rabaul<sup>26</sup>. Gordon Thomas wrote:

These were the days of rumours. One day we were all to proceed to Japan; another day all men over 45 years of age were to return to Australia. <sup>27</sup>

On 29 May, in a cable to Curtin, Evatt summarised the situation<sup>28</sup>. He correctly assumed that the Japanese couldn't find Bowden and that the Japanese couldn't have moved Ross back to Japan even if they had wanted to. He reasoned that the British summation of the situation (that the Japanese could dictate the exchange due to the huge number of Allied internees that they held)

was wrong.

Evatt asserted that it was Australia that had the advantage over the Japanese because Australia held the prisoners that Japan most desired. On 2 June, the Japanese approached the British to allow two of their Foreign Affairs officials to travel on the exchange ships to posts in Europe. The British saw this as an opportunity to again ask for the inclusion of Bowden and Ross and one of their own Foreign Office officials<sup>29</sup>. This led to further complications and a delay in the sailing of the exchange ships. [see page 11] Then on the 3rd of June, the Japanese sought confirmation that their 800 non-officials requested to be returned from Australia would be part of the exchange.<sup>30</sup>

The British informed Australia:

We confirm that we shall give effect to these priority arrangements on the understanding that Japanese will similarly give effect to priority arrangements made by us.<sup>31</sup>

There is no information about what these priority arrangements were, but it implies that the British expected another 800 Allied prisoners to be returned. Negotiations continued and the date of 20 August was agreed as the exchange date.<sup>32</sup>

In mid-June 1942, the *Montevideo Maru* had been held idle in Rabaul harbour by the Japanese authorities for almost two weeks despite the threat of air attack.

On June 19 a cable from the Prime Minister of New Zealand stated:

It is noted from telegram No. 158 that as far as Australia is concerned, the arrangements are in abeyance pending satisfactory resolution with Japanese authorities of the position of the commonwealth representatives in Singapore and Dilli.<sup>33</sup>

On 22 June, the *Montevideo Maru* was loaded with 1053 POWs and internees and departed for Hainan, China. (Unlike Rabaul, Hainan Island was within the boundaries of the “exchange zone” already defined by the Japanese Government.) Tragically, on the 1st of July 1942, the *Montevideo Maru* was sunk en route by the American submarine *USS Sturgeon*, with the loss of all prisoners on board.<sup>34</sup> The surviving crew landed and immediately requested assistance from Manila. On 3 July the Japanese cabled the British stating that the boat carrying British Official and unofficial personnel could not leave Tokyo before September 7.

On 6 July the survivors were rescued by the Japanese army. That very day the Japanese negotiating the exchange again cabled the British legation in Berne changing the exchange date from 20 August to September 7:

Because the British Government so far failed to reply to the Japanese Government's proposal regarding the date of the exchange at Lourenço Marques, the Japanese Government has been unable to proceed to make detailed arrangements for the departure of the exchange vessels. In order to ensure smooth execution of the exchange, they, therefore, desire to propose that both governments will undertake to secure arrival of the exchange vessels at Lourenço Marques on or about September 7th. It is hoped that the British Government will reply with least possible delay.<sup>35</sup>



The British replied the same day:

His Majesty's Government are surprised at the delay proposed by the Japanese Government for the exchange which was to have taken place at Lourenco Marques on the 20th August, since they themselves had already agreed to this date in a communication of 2nd July to the Swiss Legation in London after making the necessarily complicated arrangements to synchronise the arrival of ships from several distant places on the same date. <sup>36</sup>

The following day, Emperor Hirohito's brother Prince Takamatsu attended a briefing in Tokyo where he diarised the war news. His published diary states:

At 1800 Hours on the 7th, the Army in Northern Luzon reported to Navy 3rd Fleet that the ship *Montevideo Maru*, on passage from Rabaul carrying POWs to Hainan Island, was sunk by the Allies on 1 July at 0000 Hours [midnight]. The Captain, Sergeant Major Kawakami and 100 survivors landed at POUPON and went south to LAOAG. <sup>37</sup>

On the same day, two cables arrived from the British with a strange reply from the Japanese about the number of officials to be exchanged and a reply to the demand for Bowden and Ross to be included:

2. The Japanese Government therefore are of the opinion that the contention of Australian Government contained in the British communication under acknowledgement is not only untenable but tantamount to undermining the present exchange arrangements and wish to inform the British Government that unless the Australian Government rectify their unreasonable attitude, they are unable to consider repatriation of Messers. Bowden and Ross. <sup>38</sup>

This was most unusual, for the Japanese had made it quite clear from the beginning of the negotiations that Bowden and Ross would not be part of the exchange. The British were equally confused:

We do not understand apparent discrepancy between references to Bowden in this Japanese reply and in that quoted in my telegram of 2nd July [Ref.] 488. Nor are we certain as to the exact meaning of the second paragraph, though it seems probable that Japanese Government will in no circumstances agree under threat to repatriate Bowden and Ross (if indeed they are able to do so) but they may modify this attitude if threat is withdrawn. <sup>39</sup>

Then on 9 July a cable from the Dominion Office informed the Australian and New Zealand Governments that:

Position has now been materially altered by Japanese request for priority to be given to additional number of non-official from India which will entail corresponding reduction in numbers of Japanese officials and non-officials from Australia and New Zealand. In these circumstances it will now only be possible to arrange for inclusion in scheme of non-officials for whom priority has been requested and Siamese who wish to be included. <sup>40</sup>

Followed by a cable on 11 July from the Swiss Legation stating:

With regard to British and Allied nationals who are at present imprisoned in Japan Manchoukuo and elsewhere Japanese government desire to confirm after careful consideration that all will be repatriated with following exceptions: Those arrested before December 1941 and sentenced to imprisonment by judicial authorities who will not have been released till departure of exchange vessels Japanese government are of opinion that diplomatic negotiations were conducted to full extent between Japanese government and governments of countries concerned regarding amicable settlement of question relative to persons under this category before outbreak of hostilities. <sup>41</sup>

Three days after this cable, two weeks after the sailing of the *Montevideo Maru*, Curtin agreed to the exchange without restriction or the inclusion of Bowden and Ross. The reason for his decision

is unclear however, it was possibly assumed that a second exchange was going to take place quite quickly<sup>42</sup>. Then, two days later, the Japanese released David Ross on the island of Timor, to allow him to contact Australian troops then fighting a guerrilla action in the hills. Bizarrely, this was the second time that Ross had been released by the Japanese. This time, Ross remained with the Australian forces who were in radio contact with Australia and was then evacuated to Australia.<sup>43</sup>

The exchange negotiations dragged on. Numbers and names of internees were checked and rechecked; names of ships to carry the internees to Lourenco Marques (the designated neutral exchange port in Africa) were suggested and rejected for various reasons. The question of sending relief parcels to POWs and internees had been discussed throughout the negotiations<sup>44</sup>. It is difficult to discern what exactly was agreed upon, but on the 13th of July, a Navy cable stated that the *City of Canterbury* would be the diplomatic ship and the *Rajula* would carry Red Cross stores, clothing, and food from Australia to Lourenco Marques<sup>45</sup>. They were to sail together from Melbourne on the 7th of August. Coordinating the preparation and safe passage of the ships was difficult. The exchange date was shifted back by a week to 27 August.<sup>46</sup>

Due to other commitments which precluded it from being able to make the August deadline, the *Rajula* was replaced by the *Devonshire*<sup>47</sup>. This confused the Navy, as the *Devonshire* was a troopship and they requested a further report:

Your 0319/15th not understood since *Devonshire's* cargo capacity is negligible. Request further report.<sup>48</sup>

On 16 July in a cable from the Dominion Office, the Japanese suggested that the exchange should take place in two parts. Incredibly, internees were offered from all Japanese-controlled territory:

(a) To arrive at Lourenco Marques 27th August and to comprise "British and Allied officials and non-officials from all Japanese controlled territories except China and some non-officials from China and all Japanese and Siamese from United Kingdom, Africa, Middle East, and India".

(b) To arrive at Lourenco Marques 7th September and to comprise British and Allied officials and non-officials from China and Japanese and Siamese nationals from Australia.

The British added:

We have assumed that His Majesty's Government in the Dominions would see no objection and in view of extreme urgency have agreed to proposal.<sup>49</sup>

This was a significant development, for suddenly the Allied personnel who were in areas outside the Japanese-applied "exchange zone" were now eligible for exchange. It also meant that the British subjects whose return had been negotiated by the British Government would be on the first exchange on 27 August, while the officials and internees from Australia would arrive on the second exchange on 7 September.

So where were the British internees coming from to balance the numbers for this second exchange? It suggests that the internees that would be returned to Australia would be either part of the second movement, or kept at Lourenco Marques until the arrival of the ships from Australia. The British Government immediately cabled the Australian Government:

I assume you will let me have at early date consequential alterations in names or itinerary of exchange ships.<sup>50</sup>

With the change of date, the preparations for the exchange proceeded with many cables needed to finalise the ships that would be used, the dates of their movement, and the navigation details for the arrangement of safe passage. On 1 August, the Department of External Affairs cabled London to inform them that the *City of Canterbury* would be the only ship involved in the exchange<sup>51</sup>. One week later, a British Navy cable stated:

Owing to hitch in negotiations all preparations should be made for sailing "City of Paris" and "City of Canterbury" but they should not repetition not be sailed until further instructions are received...<sup>52</sup>

The "hitch" was caused by the mistaken British belief that Sir Arthur and Lady Blackburn<sup>52a</sup> from Hong Kong, who were being exchanged following the agreement to allow safe conduct of two Japanese officials to Lisbon, via the exchange at Lourenco Marques, were not being included. The British also incorrectly assumed that thirteen Norwegian sailors from Siam, which had been included in the negotiations, had not boarded one of the Japanese exchange vessels. The following day, another cable from the Navy stated:

Defer embarkation and sailing of Diplomat ship "City of Canterbury" until instructed.<sup>53</sup>

The misconception was finally settled on 11 August when a cable from the Swiss to the British Foreign Office stated:

All Norwegians from Siam embarked on S.S. "Valaya" and trans-shipped to "Tatuta Maru" at Saigon. Regarding Blackburn as already communicated through Swiss Government they will embark on "Kamakura Maru".<sup>54</sup>

With the confusion, the exchange from Australia that the Japanese had scheduled for the 7th of September had been cancelled, and then brought forward, but with one ship only (dispensing with the *Devonshire*).

(These changes later caused severe disruptions for the passengers to be returned to Australia from Lourenco Marques, as the *City of Canterbury* was not scheduled to return to Australia from this remote Portuguese colony.)<sup>55</sup>

The order to embark the prisoners onto the *City of Canterbury* was finally received on 12 August.<sup>56</sup> Four days later, with Japan's first ambassador to Australia, Tatsuo Kawai, aboard, along with his staff and the requested non-officials, it sailed for Lourenco Marques.

Surprisingly, another batch of mail then appeared in Port Moresby on about 17 August 1942, which included letters from civilians including Administrator Harold Page. This matter was dealt with by Major General Basil Morris in a letter to the Minister for External Affairs, which bypassed the normal Departmental channels (which had been used previously to discuss the April mail-drop). It was assumed that this mail had missed being found after the first drop<sup>57</sup>. Only a partial list of fifty-two names of civilian authors was supplied to the Department of External Affairs by the Army. The exact number of letters received was never revealed, despite this information being requested by the Department of External Affairs. In 1943, the Australian High

Commissioner in London requested information on mail received from internees held by the Japanese. In its draft reply, the Post Master General's Department contradicted the information given by Major General Morris. It stated:

24th May, 1942. 395 letters dropped by Japanese plane, Port Moresby. 3 other bundles dropped in September 1942.<sup>58</sup>

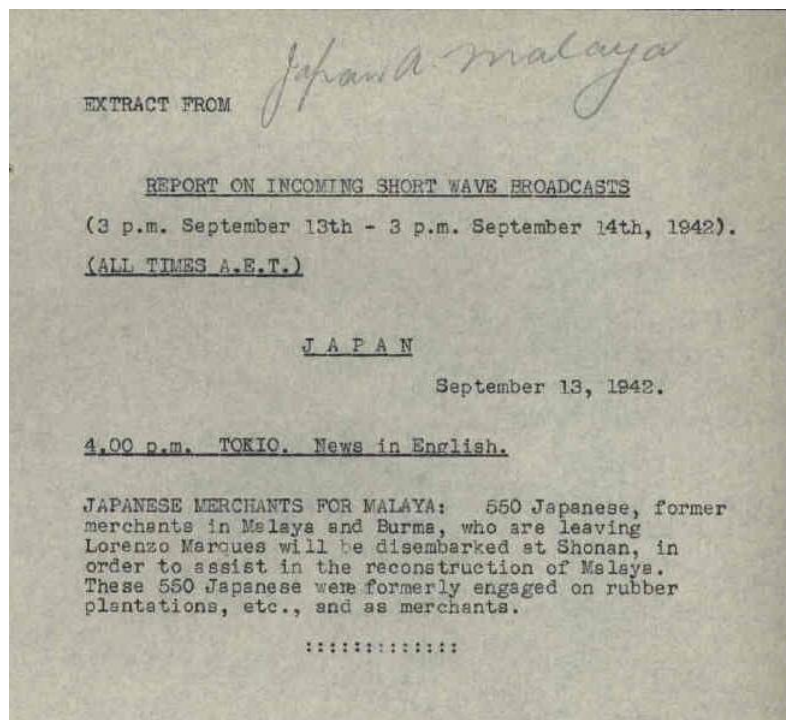
In the first drop, each bundle contained one hundred letters. This suggests that as many as 300 letters were contained in the second batch.<sup>59</sup> Exactly why the detailed information would need to be suppressed is currently unknown however there is evidence to suggest that by August 1942 the Australian Government knew that the civilian men had left Rabaul on a ship.

The internee exchange took place at Lourenco Marques on 27 August 1942. Of the 831 internees that Curtin released from Australia, 405 were disembarked from the Japanese exchange ship in Singapore and Java to assist the Japanese Army. Shigeru Nakabayashi, who was forced to leave the ship in Singapore, was later to say:

"I thought my country cared for me and was going to take me home. But it abandoned me there... I was very angry and disappointed".

He was put to work producing asphalt for sealing airfield runways and wasn't returned to Japan until 1944.<sup>60</sup>

The Australian shortwave listening post reported that on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 1942 a broadcast from Radio Tokyo stated that 550 Japanese merchants from Malaya and Burma who were leaving Lorenzo Marques would be disembarked in Shonan [Singapore] to assist in the reconstruction of Malaya. These merchants could only have been the Japanese internees released from Australia.



After the exchange, the Japanese Foreign Minister, Masayuki Tani, broadcast a message referring to further exchanges<sup>61</sup>. The British immediately started negotiations for a second exchange. In January 1943 the Australian Government cabled London:

We note you are now prepared to include all Australians remaining in the areas covered by the first exchange. In view, however, of the disparity between numbers concerned in previous Australian-Japanese exchange, we desire that you request the inclusion of all our remaining officials from all occupied territory which would embrace all those originally in New Guinea and Nauru. This should not be difficult, as we have some reason to believe that they have been removed from the theatre of operation and are interned elsewhere in the Japanese empire.<sup>62</sup>

There is evidence to show that the Australian Government also knew that the ship had been sunk and the men drowned (see 1943 and 1944 evidence below) The negotiations for a second exchange continued but hit a snag when the Japanese requested 350 merchant seamen from Australia<sup>63</sup>. The second exchange never proceeded, as the negotiations over the seamen's status were prolonged. By the time that an agreement was reached, the Japanese couldn't spare any ships from their war effort.

Ten days after the Japanese surrender on the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945, Major Harold Williams, who had been assisting with the negotiations for the exchange, was on his way to Japan. After a brief stopover in Manila, he arrived in Japan on 27 September 1945. The following day, he attended the Japanese Prisoner of War Information Bureau and with the assistance of its staff found the Japanese nominal roll of prisoners on board the *Montevideo Maru*. Two days later, he wrote to Colonel J. McCahon, head of Directorate of Prisoners of War and Internees, that with the aid of the rolls he had taken with him to Japan, he had managed with Japanese help to translate the names of 250 AIF members who were aboard. Although his report states that he was searching for "certain documents", Williams made no mention of the exchange in his report, for at that time the exchange was classified "Secret".<sup>64</sup>

Williams' report from Japan forms the basis of the history of the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* that we have today. Although fully aware of the exchange and the negotiations, he divulges nothing of it in his report due to its classified nature.

Ever since 1945, historians have been writing about the *Montevideo Maru* in ignorance of the facts surrounding these exchange negotiations. The internee exchange evidence throws new light on what occurred. The secret classification of this information would also explain the behaviour of the Chifley Government when calls for an inquiry were dismissed.

Accusations of a cover-up were first raised in 1946. From the emerging evidence discussed in this paper, there seems to be a definite containment of information. As an example, the secret Admiralty Weekly Intelligence Reports in the National Archives of Australia run in date order, except for the period covering the sailing and sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*, which has been substituted by an index file. The sequence in the NAA catalogue is currently:

- 1) Secret Admiralty Weekly Intelligence Report, number 119, 19 June 1942
- 2) Index to Secret Admiralty Weekly Intelligence Reports numbered 108 to 120, April to June 1942
- 3) Secret Admiralty Weekly Intelligence Report, number 121, 3 July 1942

There are also examples of information being suppressed during the war. In 1944 the Secretary of Army, F.S. Sinclair, accidentally sent intelligence information about the movement of men from Rabaul to the Department of External Affairs:

Large number Australians reported moved about June 42 and possible that all except 60 sailed for Hainan about June 42 aboard ship believed sunk on voyage.<sup>65</sup>

This accurate intelligence was quickly replaced with a second cable containing nothing but propaganda about the mistreatment of prisoners in Rabaul<sup>66</sup>. In notes written in 1945, concerning a list of missing New Guinea Residents thought to be captured by the Japanese, J. C. McManus, Supervising Intelligence Officer at the Australian Navy, referred to a 1943 report of men from Rabaul being drowned on a Japanese ship.<sup>67</sup>

Within these same files, there are many references to cables that currently can't be located. This suggests there are still files yet to be unearthed on what occurred.

Despite the large concentration of official and non-official Australians in Rabaul, and the negotiation for the exchange of letters, there is no mention of the men in Rabaul in the available archival files about the first exchange, and only one reference to the Japanese interned in Australia from New Guinea<sup>68</sup>.

Considering the imbalance in numbers and the potential value to the Japanese war effort with the inclusion of the internees from the Netherlands East Indies, it would appear that the Japanese negotiations for the exchange to take place in two parts convinced Curtin to allow the exchange to go ahead in its entirety without the inclusion of Bowden and Ross. Interestingly there is nothing in the exchange files to suggest what influence his sudden decision.

In the very series of files in the Australian National Archives that should contain information about the exchanges, DPWI, and further reports by Major Williams, there is a file note:

Series notes for series B3856 **Indicators** Average file size: standard Digital image charge: Standard

**This series was the main correspondence series of the 2nd Echelon, Army Headquarters and the subsequent agency, Central Army Records Office. The bulk of the extant files relate to Australian prisoners of war and internees held overseas and missing personnel during World War II (WWII).** Also included are records which relate to the administration of internment camps in Australia. Part of the series relates to movements of personnel during the later part of WW II and also during the Korean War. **The records relating to prisoners of war and internees overseas include: nominal rolls of Australian POWs, casualty reports, statements made by recovered personnel, movements of personnel and lists of protected personnel.** Also included are nominal rolls of UK casualties, copies of proceedings against prisoners of war, statements and copies of proceedings relating to war crimes and Japanese atrocities.

The records relating to enemy prisoners of war and internees held in Australia are concerned mainly with the administration of the camps. Files contain information regarding the following: number of persons

interned in Australia, prisoners of war strength, movement of prisoners of war, instructions re enemy prisoners of war held in Australia and registration of deaths. Files relating to individual internees are held in a relating series (CRS B3812, Correspondence files, multiple number series (121 primary number).

Most of the files do not have file covers. The files usually consist of several folios, each with a different number typed or handwritten in the top right-hand corner of the folio and held together by metal pin clips. This number was allocated from one of the registration booklets (B3948). When two or more folios related to the same subject they were grouped together and the last folio registered became the top number, i.e., file number. The entries in the registration booklet were then amended to show the new top number. **The files in this series were culled before transfer to Archives, in 1947, according to note found with the remaining files, and in 1957 approximately half of this series was destroyed.** <sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately, with the lack of documentary evidence to clarify the Government's involvement in the exchange; the full story of what occurred will remain hidden long after it should have been revealed.

Footnotes

1. <http://news.ninemsn.com.au/national/montevideo/452388/now-its-the-hunt-for-the-montevideo-maru>
  2. A816/1: 14/303/95
  3. War Records - Consuls Exchange of Australian & Japanese Diplomatic Representatives & Civilians Part I. NAA A981/4 page 179
  4. *ibid.* page 171
  5. *ibid.* page 157
  6. *ibid.* page 145
  7. *ibid.* page 147
  8. Bowden was sent two cables by the department of external affairs cable 323 instructed him to stay and 326  
<http://www.info.dfat.gov.au/info/historical/HistDocs.nsf/vSearch/30286005E6B83D90CA256B7E001467C3?openDocument&start=1&Highlight=2,Bowden&SearchOrder=4>)
- which informed him that the Government would insist on his inclusion in the exchange.
9. History - Directorate of Prisoners of War [POW or PW] and Internees - 1939-1951 - Volume 1. NAA A7711/1898192 page 106
  10. "City of Canterbury" [includes information re voyage to Lourenco Marques re swap of Japanese internees for Australia POWs; NAA B6121 466BI 962541 page 7
  11. History - Directorate of Prisoners of War [POW or PW] and Internees - 1939-1951 - Volume 1. NAA A7711/1898192 page 50
  12. (Possibly during the highly unusual massed raid by Australian Catalinas on the night of 20 April 1942. 20 Squadron RAAF Operations Record Book  
<http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/imaginer.asp?B=1358750&I=1&SE=1> - p111 This Squadron generally flew a pattern sea reconnaissance patrols that did not go near Rabaul (4S,152E) but on the night of 20-21 April it notes, very unusually, "*bombing attack on ground installations at Rabaul*" The slow-flying Catalinas were mainly used for long range reconnaissance and mine laying, flying individually. The massed raid on the night of 20 April was "very unusual" because of both the numbers of aircraft involved, and the target. 20 Squadron Operations Record Book  
<http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/imaginer.asp?B=1358750&I=1&SE=1>  
- p111 You will see that the pattern is all sea reconnaissance patrols not going near Rabaul (4S,152E) but on the night of 20-21 April - suddenly a "bombing attack on ground installations at Rabaul" - And then: "Squadron records destroyed due to enemy action"...!  
11 Squadron ORB <http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/imaginer.asp?B=1358718&I=1&SE=1>  
- p147 gives more detail about the Rabaul raid - it was a combined effort between 11 and 20 Sqs. I can see no further mention of Rabaul up till the end of April (p152).
  13. Japan. Negotiations for Exchanges with NAA A2937/ 111 page 104
  14. Bevege Margaret *Behind Barbed Wire* ISBN 0702224928
  15. *ibid.* History of DPWI page 50
  16. *ibid.* History of DPWI page 106
  17. Australian troops at Rabaul, Java, Timor and Ambon. Question of relief and maintenance of



- contact. NAA A5954/69 page 51
18. Exchange of Consular and Diplomatic officials. NAA A1608/1, B33/1/4 Part1
  19. War Cabinet Minute No 2247 - Exchange of prisoners with Japan. NAA A2676 1566499 page 64
  20. *ibid.* page 52
  21. *ibid.* page 54
  22. *ibid.* page 52
  23. Exchange of Prisoners of War and Internees with Japan. NAA A1608 page 83. This information was contained in a report from British Secretary of Dominion affairs Cemet Attlee which Curtin received in May 1943.
  24. Gordon Thomas, *Rabaul 1942-1945*, Unpublished.
  25. The internment diary of Joyce Oldroyd-Harris – copy held by Rod Miller, author of *Lost Women of Rabaul* (not yet published).
  26. AWM55, item 3/3 Allied Translator and Interpreter Section, South West Pacific Area: Current Translations Nos. 26-35.
  27. Gordon Thomas, *Rabaul 1942-1945*, Unpublished
  28. Exchange of Officials with Japan. 2/5/42 - 27/3/43. NAA A5954/69 page 106
  29. *ibid.* page 103
  30. Exchange of Consular and Diplomatic officials. NAA A1608/1 B33/1/4 Part1 page 148
  31. "City of Canterbury" [includes information re voyage to Lourenco Marques re swap of Japanese internees for Australia POW's; NAA B6121 [466BI](#) 962541
  32. Exchange of Consular and Diplomatic officials A1608/1 B33/1/4 Part1 page 88
  33. [Japanese internees mail for Japan MP508/1/0 255/702/1835 page 4]
  34. Miller Rod *Lost Women of Rabaul*
  35. Japan. Negotiations for Exchanges with NAA A2937/ 111 page 81
  36. Japan. Negotiations for Exchanges with NAA A2937/ 111 page 79
  37. <http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/enobuhito/enobuhito.html>
  38. Exchange of Consular and Diplomatic officials. NAA A1608/1, B33/1/4 Part1 page 78
  39. *ibid.* page 80
  40. Japan. Negotiations for Exchanges with NAA A2937/ 111 page 66
  41. Japan. Negotiations for Exchanges with NAA A2937/ 111 page 64
  42. Exchange of Consular and Diplomatic officials. NAA A1608/1, B33/1/4 Part1 page 77
  43. <http://www.airwaysmuseum.com/David%20Ross%20biog.htm>
  44. Exchange of Consular and Diplomatic officials. NAA A1608/1 B33/1/4 Part1 page 143
  45. "City of Canterbury" [includes information re voyage to Lourenco Marques re swap of Japanese internees for Australia POWs; NAA B6121 [466BI](#) 962541 page 161
  46. Exchange of Consular and Diplomatic officials. NAA A1608/1 B33/1/4 Part1 page 72
  47. "City of Canterbury" [includes information re voyage to Lourenco Marques re swap of Japanese internees for Australia POW's; NAA B6121 [466BI](#) 962541 page 47
  48. *ibid.* page 46
  49. *ibid.* page 156
  50. *ibid.* page 154
  51. *ibid.* page 131 & 34
  52. *ibid.* page 30
  - 52a. Sir Arthur (KCMG CBE) and Lady Isabelle Blackburn (Nee Piry born French)) Counsellor to the British Embassy to China which was in Shanghai in 1941 moved from Nanking. They were initially

put into Stanley on 25 Jan 42 but moved to Shanghai sailing on 22 Jul 42 from HK. At Shanghai they joined the entire British Diplomatic Staff on the Exchange plan with Japanese diplomats sailing from Shanghai on the Kamakura Maru on the 17 Aug 42 which docked in Lourenco Marques (Now Maputo) Mozambique where the physical exchange took place on 7 to 9 September 1942, they then sailed to Liverpool on the ss Narkanda.

53. "City of Canterbury" *ibid.* page 27

54. Japan. Negotiations for Exchanges with NAA A2937/ 111 page 26

55. War Records - Consuls Exchange of Australian & Japanese Diplomatic Representatives & Civilians Part 2. NAA A981/4 page 31

56. "City of Canterbury" [includes information re voyage to Lourenco Marques re swap of Japanese internees for Australia POW's; NAA B6121 [466BI](#) 962541 page 26

57. Civilians detained by Japanese A518 [DS16/2/1 PART 1](#) page 286

58. Exchange of Prisoners of War and Internees with Japan. NAA A1608 , AJ20/1/1 Page 179

59. *ibid.*

60. Nagata Yuriko *Unwanted Aliens* ISBN 0 7022 2906 7

61. Exchange of Prisoners of War and Internees with Japan. NAA A1608, AJ20/1/1 Page 131

62. Exchange of Officials with Japan. 2/5/42 - 27/3/43. NAA A5954/69 page 9

63. History - Directorate of Prisoners of War [POW or PW] and Internees - 1939-1951 - Volume 1. NAA A7711/1898192 page 106

64. Report of investigations in Manila and Japan re Prisoners of War and civilians by Major H.S. Williams AWM 54 779/1/1

65. Civilians detained by Japanese. NAA A518 [DS16/2/1 PART 1](#) page 110

66. Civilians detained by Japanese. NAA A518 [DS16/2/1 PART 1](#) page 108 The pages in this file are out of order. The event starts at page 131. On 21 April 1944 the British asked the Department of External Territories: "Have you any information suggesting British Australian or Indian Prisoners of war in or around Rabaul or if moved date of move and destination. "Page 113 is a request by J.R. Halligan, Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, asking for information about the reply to the British cable. Page 110 is the cable sent by Sinclair to Halligan in reply. Note the double lines and cancelled written across the page and the hand written notation: "Take no action see memo of 28/6/44"Page 109 is a hand written memo: The memo reads: Colonel Little - Vic. Barracks Melb. S/M6781 Copy of telegram to W. office For Co about Rabaul- Take no action until further advised. There are some inaccuracies in the message. These should be cleared up in a few days. Col. Little stated that G.H.Q had advised this morning to above effect & asked that the message be held for the time being. [Initialled by Mr Black] 28.6.44 Colonel Little phoned & stated that a further letter was being signed today which will alter the one of 27.6.44. He said that the information that they were able to get was so contradictory that it was difficult to arrive at any definite conclusions. [Initialled Mr Black] 7.7.44 Page 108 is the replacement cable written to replace Sinclair's original cable page 110. Page 107 notes the cancellation of page 110.

67. Civilians detained by Japanese. NAA A518 [DS16/2/1 PART 2](#) page 222-221 68. Only one mention. Exchange of Consular and Diplomatic officials. NAA A1608/1 B33/1/4 Part1 page 200-201. Email Correspondence from Yuriko Nagata states that 34 Japanese men from New Guinea were brought to Australia and held at Loveday. Some may have been at Hay if they had been fishermen before the war. The sad story of these [ethnic Japanese] New Guinea men is that they were deported to Japan after the war, which caused permanent disruption for their families. Give a reference to Hiromitsu Iwamoto's book on the Japanese from Papua and New Guinea who were

interned 69. <http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/SeriesDetail.asp?M=3&B=B3856>