Chapter 8

Searching for dad
Unsolved mysteries of the war

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There is a significant group of people who have been profoundly affected by the events of the war in New Guinea. Yet they never lived in a war zone, were never under attack and 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, never to be 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 1961–78, I had heard the story of the loss of the prison ship, the *Montevideo Maru*, and had seen in Rabaul one of a number 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 lead me to documentary evidence in archives at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra and in Melbourne. And it would involve 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 (Southerland, 1993) is about six mission women in New Guinea, wives and nurses who lost their husbands and colleagues. *A very long war: the families who waited* (Melbourne, 2000) examines the experience of a cross-section of military and civilian families who are still affected by this episode.

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?
For the women the searching began during the silent years of the war. In the months immediately after January 1942, some Australian soldiers and civilians struggled 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 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 the 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, the 2/22nd’s officers in Japan and former prisoners from camps across south-east Asia came home. But when 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 Navy.
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 aboard 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? Perhaps they were tortured and executed or suffered a 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 Prisoner of War 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 used 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 didn’t they at least give the older men the chance to be evacuated while there was still time? Because they believe that they have been poorly served through their government’s errors of judgement, 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.

ラリア戦争記念館には、潜水艦の追跡記録と結果が、航海日誌として保存されている。日本の船船会社は、自社の船が没したのを知っていた。ラパウルで捕虜となった人々の名簿は、日本の俘虜情報局が保持していた。オーストラリア当局はトルとワイタポで殺されたと思われるオーストラリア人の一部の名前を把握していたが、それを公表しなかった。1945年の末まで、これらの謎をつなぎ合わせた人は誰もなかった。情報を得られなかったのは、待って続いていた女たちだけではない。

第2は、オーストラリア政府が意図的なもみ消しをしたのではないか、との疑いが一部にあったことである。モンテビデオ丸の沈没で多くのオーストラリア人の命が奪われたことを、オーストラリア政府当局は行方不明者すべての最期を説明する言い口に利用したのではないか、と多くの家族が考えた。当時から現在に至るまで、オーストラリア政府の対応に対して、辛つるな見方と怒りがずっと残っており、非難の大部分が政府に集中している。戦後も続く怒りをどこにぶつけるか、と家族に迫る。興味深いことにアメリカの潜水艦を非難する人は少ない。「誰が乗っていたかを知らなかったのだから」とか「船に捕虜を輸送していると知らせるために、赤十字のマークをつけるべきだった」とかのコメントが散ってくる。日本海军を責める人も何人かいる。しかしこの攻撃の対象は、オーストラリア軍とオーストラリア政府であった。オーストラリア軍が、ワーク部隊を始めとする大規模の海軍、空軍、そして独立中隊を、ニューギニアへ送り込んだことは自体が問題だったのだろうかのだろうかと彼らの言い分だった。一般人にとっては、まだ時間余裕がある時期に、少なくとも年齢の男たちだけでも難行することはできなかったのだろうか。政府のまずい判断でひどい目にあったのだろうかと思われているため、行方不明者の家族の多くは、政府がまだ何か隠しているのではないかと疑っているのである。そもそも疑いが正当なものなら、行方不明者の運命についての政府の発表も疑ってかかるべきであるというのである。政府信

The Japanese merchant ship Montevideo Maru before it was commissioned by the navy to be used as a transport vessel. 　

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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, Major 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 Battalion and civilians of New Guinea.

But were those the names of men who had been on board the *Montevideo Maru*, or simply 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 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 to uncover the truth through legal processes. 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, Lieutenant Colonel 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 are now nearing 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 generation 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 of the possibility that 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.

The questions about the mysteries of the war years are still alive for many Australian families today. Without definite answers and formal documentation, some have faced legal obstacles. The stresses of uncertainty have affected physical and psychological health. Families have tried to deal with unresolved grief fifty and even sixty years after their loss was known. They have written memoirs, searched archives, established memorials and made pilgrimages. Most of them have accepted that it is most unlikely that their questions about the fate of a family member can ever be answered. Even so, it is most important to them that the significant loss from the islands of New Guinea is recognised and remembered.

第7には、家族の者たちは搜索の努力をどこに向けべきであるかはっきりとわからなかった。ニューギニアでの戦争に関してはあまりの量の文献があるとはいえ、多くの家族は公式戦史を読んでいなかった。人々は手紙や個人のつながりの中で知ったニュースや頼るか、一般読者向けに海岸監視者や脱出した人々によって書かれた本を頼にしていた。ここで問題になるのは、著者が提供できる情報が限られおり、また手稿の情報がそれぞれの逃出の経験の範囲内に限られていたことだった。公文書館には数多くの史料が保存されていたが、その多くは公開されていないうちに見え、素人には量の点でも内容の点でも手に負えないように思えた。

そして最後に、事実に基づかないうわさが現在でもこの人々の間で交わされ、彼らは今日でも何とか議論をしようとしている。ラバウルから姿を消した人々に関して、今でも語られるいろいろな話は、いつか実証されるのだろうか。しかし、それはないであろう。同時に、うわさが本当ではないと証明するのもまた難しい。今週、私の本『長かった戦争』を読んだある人から長い手紙を受け取った。彼はその中で、繰り返し主張された一つの可能性にまたごりうれている。彼は手紙に、1,000人以上の人々が1942年にラバウルのシンプトン停止場から船に乗せられたにもかかわらず、「アメリカ軍の潜水艦がモンテビデオ丸を見つけた時点で、その船に槍撃（生死に関わらず一人も乗っていなかったとから信じている）と言う」と書いている。何年か前にイギリスで読んだ文書には、ある日本人信号手がラバウルでオーストラリア人たちと親しくなり、彼らが船に乗せられどこかに送られた後の運命を気憂っていたと言っていた。しかし残念ながら、手紙の主はこの文書をどこにしまいこんだのだろうかと懸念している。ニューギニア島で育ったある女性は、魚雷攻撃を受けた船があったというのを「信じたかったのだと話している」と信じているが、彼女の意見が全く無視されたと非常に苦しく書いている。

多くのオーストラリア人家族にとって、戦争中のこの不可解な謎は、今でも解決されていないことである。はっきりとした答えや正式な書物がなかったため、法律的な問題が直面した人もいた。確かにそれが分かれないことによるストレスは、かれだやここでの健康に悪影響を及ぼした。長期にわたって40年以上の今でも、家族はまだ消え去らない悲しみをかかえている。そのため人々は記憶を書いたり、文書館を調べたり、記念碑を建立したり慰霊の旅をした。ほとんどの人は、自分の家族のたどった運命への問いかけには、答えははっきりしてあろうと示している。たとえそうであっても、ニューギニアの島々で起こったこのような実在を認めそして記憶することが、今後の人々にとって非常に大切なことなのである。

田村恵子訳