

# **The Sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* - 1st July 1942**

On 1st July, 1942 the *Montevideo Maru*, carrying 1053 prisoners of the Japanese forces, most of them Australian, was sunk by an Allied submarine, USS *Sturgeon*. The ship bore no special markings to indicate it carried Prisoners of War and it appeared to be a legitimate target.

The prisoners had been captured in January 1942 by Japanese forces in Rabaul on New Britain, now known as Papua New Guinea, they were being transferred to Hainan Island, off Southern China, to be used as forced labour.

The *Montevideo Maru* was torpedoed off Luzon in the Philippines in the South China Sea, by the USS *Sturgeon*, unaware that it was carrying allied prisoners. All the prisoners on board were lost. The Australian lives lost equalled twice the total number of Australian Soldiers killed during the Vietnam War

The deaths on the *Montevideo Maru* were not fully revealed in Australia until after the end of the war when evidence was found in Japan.

During the war the Red Cross made several enquiries concerning those who had been captured on New Britain and received no answer. The Japanese Foreign Office sought information and the Swiss legation made at least 7 unsuccessful attempts to obtain information. No response was forthcoming.

Pieces of information had come from wartime sources and captured Japanese personnel. After hostilities ended Japanese and surviving civilians in Rabaul pieced together information. An Australian officer, searching through records in Tokyo, found a list of 1056 names. The names had been translated from English into Japanese script and then back again creating considerable difficulties. The translated roll reached Canberra in late October 1945. The families and friends of Lark Force and the civilians on the ship spent three and a half years wondering about their fate. They were notified officially after the war ended.

