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6 October 1945

TO : Recovered Personnel Division
FROM : Major H. S. Williams, Australian Officer attached Recovered Personnel Division, Tokyo

Report re Japanese steamer "MONTEVIDEO MARU" torpedoed off
LUZON, 1 July 1942.

1. Preface. From information received it was known that about 1000 Australian PW and civilian internees taken by the Japanese in RABAU were shipped from there during June, 1942, to a destination unknown.

As Japan did not transmit the names or any information whatsoever concerning the above mentioned persons many enquiries were made by the Australian Authorities to Japan through the Protecting Power and IRCC, Geneva, but without effect.

This matter has accordingly been investigated, and the following report which is based on inquiries personally made at the Huryo Joho Kyoku (Prisoner of War Information Bureau) Foreign Office, the Navy and Army Ministries, Swiss Legation, International Red Cross, Japanese Red Cross Society and the Osaka Shosen Kaisha (owners of SS Montevideo Maru) is submitted for information, with the suggestion that it possibly offers an explanation as to why many Allied PW are still not accounted for.

2. Description of Casualty. (based on information provided by Navy Dept.) The SS "MONTEVIDEO MARU", owned by Osaka Shosen Kaisha and chartered by Japanese Navy left Rabaul on 22 June 1942, bound for HAINAN ISLAND carrying 845 PW, 208 civilian internees, the crew and a naval guard comprising an ensign, a medical orderly and 63 naval ratings.

Before dawn on 1 July 1942, whilst proceeding without escort, she was torpedoed at a point about 7 miles off BOJEADOR Lighthouse on north west corner of LUZON.

It is said that as the vessel sank instantly there was no time to launch any lifeboats or to radio a distress message. However the Captain and "more than 10" of the crew boarded a cutter that had floated off the sinking ship, and they eventually landed at BOJEADOR, where the majority of them, including the Captain, were killed by guerilla forces. Five of the party escaped and set out on foot for Manila, two died en route and the remaining three reached Manila after 10 days wandering. On arrival there they reported the sinking to the Japanese authorities, whereupon, according to the Navy Dept, "an immediate search was ordered, but due to the lapse of time no trace of either ship or men could be found. It is possible that some of the prisoners of war may have been able to land somewhere."

Information as to the casualties among the crew have not yet been confirmed, but this information is being sought from the owners of the vessel.

3. Notification of Casualty. On 20 July 1942 the Navy Dept. reported the sinking of "Montevideo Maru" to the owners.

On 6 January 1943 the Navy Dept. forwarded details of the sinking to the PW Information Bureau, together with a complete nominal roll of 848 PW and 208 civilians who were on board and presumed lost.

It is to be particularly noted that the later information was not communicated by the Information Bureau, and remained hidden in the files of the Bureau until discovered by the writer on 28 September 1945.

4. Enquiries made by IRC on behalf of Australia. Many written enquiries were made by the IRC Delegate in Tokyo to the Prisoners of War Information Bureau, culminating in a communication dated 20 April 1945, referring to a telegraphic advice from the Committee in Geneva that "information from Japanese Official sources of present welfare of enemy civilians and/or PW detained at Rabaul, New Britain is singularly lacking," and seeking information.

The Information Bureau took exception to the use of the phrase "singularly lacking" as conveying criticism, dissatisfaction, mistrust or suspicion and threatened a discontinuance of their information service including facilities for visits by IRC delegates to PW camps. Despite the Delegate's assurance that the phrase had been used by way of presenting a comparison, the Bureau demanded that the IRC Committee in Geneva should clarify their views in a manner satisfactory to Japan.

Despite the fact that the Bureau had withheld the information which it had received as far back as January, 1943, it has persistently informed all enquirers that all known information had been transmitted.

5. Enquiries made by Japanese Foreign Office. Owing to the destruction of the Foreign Office's records, full details of the enquiries made by the Foreign Office at the request of the Swiss Legation acting as Protecting Power for British interests are not available. However the Information Bureau has admitted that an official enquiry was received on 31 May 1944 from the Foreign Office concerning 199 named civilians taken by the Japanese in Rabaul. The Bureau did not transmit any reply to the Foreign Office, nor apparently did the Foreign Office press for a reply.

6. Enquiries made by Swiss Legation on behalf of Australian Authorities. More than 7 formal interventions were made by the Swiss Legation in an effort to secure information from the Foreign Office. In addition the Legation made numerous verbal enquiries and calls both on the Information Bureau and the Foreign Office. The Information Bureau gave no information and the Foreign Office generally ignored the enquiries. The only definite reply that was given to the Legation was to the effect that "it seems that none of the persons referred to are in the hands of Japan and it is believed that all may have taken refuge in the hills."

It will be noted that while the true facts were withheld, a story, which must have been known to have been false, was given out instead.

7. The Information Bureau's responsibility. Lt Gen TAMURA, Director of the Information Bureau, admits that the full details were in the possession of the Bureau since January 1943. He expresses regret that the information was not transmitted to Australia, but claims it was due to an oversight.

8. Letters addressed to the 1053 persons who were lost. The relatives of the PW and civilians who were lost have over a period of nearly 3-1/2 years,

been despatching mail in the belief that their men folk were alive. Evidence is available from recovered PW who were working in the PW mail sorting centre at Omori Camp that a great deal of such mail reached Japan. In reply to my enquiries the Bureau has stated that all such mail has been forwarded from Japan to Rabaul. I have declined to accept that explanation and have made a demand for full details of the manner in which such mail was handled and disposed of and also its present whereabouts.

9. Investigations on other aspects of this case are continuing.


(Major) H. S. Williams

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