NEW GUINEA

AUSTRALIAN INVOLVEMENT

THE NEW GUINEA CAMPAIGN - 1942-45

Little was known in Europe about Papua New Guinea until the 19th century although Spanish and Portuguese explorers had reached the island in the 16th century, and traders from South East Asia had collected Bird of Paradise plumes. By 1884 the Germans ruled the northern half as German New Guinea, and the British, the southern half, as British New Guinea.

During World War I the Australians captured German New Guinea and ruled it as a mandated territory under the League of Nations, until 1975 when PNG achieved independence from Australia.

On the outbreak of World War II, on 3rd September 1939, nothing much changed in the islands until 7th December 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. Australia had by then realised that they were vulnerable to attack and the decision was taken to establish Lark Force with the aim of maintaining a forward observation line for as long as possible, being raised in March 1941.

Command of Lark Force was given to a decorated WWI army officer, Lt Col John Scanlan, who had been on the reserve list since 1920 and was the deputy Governor of Hobart Gaol.

The Japanese invaded Rabaul on 23rd January 1942 and Lark Force was soon overrun, fleeing into the jungle inland. Approximately 160 Australians were subsequently captured and massacred by the Japanese, wherupon Scanlan surrended to try and prevent further bloodshed.

The captured NCO's, ordinary soldiers, civilians and missionaries were embarked on the SS Montevideo Maru which sailed for Hainan Island on 22nd June 1942, only to be torpedoed by the USS Sturgeon, off the Philippine coast, on the 1st July 1942. She was not marked as a PoW ship. Over 1000 PoW's perished and this is now regarded as Australia's worst maritime disaster.

The officers were shipped out some 2 weeks later on the SS Maruto Maru which was again attacked by the USS Sturgeon, but escaped without any significant damage.

Operations against the Japanese now proceeded in earnest, and by the end of 1942 the Japanese advance had been halted by a combination of US, Australian and NZ forces, under General MacArthur.

The next three years were spent in various battles and campaigns and mopping up operations.

Lt Col John Joseph Scanlan, DSO * survived the war and returned to Hobart Gaol, as Governor, until retirement.

He died on 6th December 1962 at Kingston, Tasmania.

NEW GUINEA

BOMB-DROP MAIL OF 28th APRIL 1942

Very little mail has been reported to or from Prisoners of War in New Guinea.

Rabaul fell to the Japanese on 23rd January 1942 after brief resistance. By the end of April there were some 400 servicemen and 100 civilians in captivity at Rabaul. During a Japanese air raid on Port Moresby on 28th April, one or more packages, attached to long white streamers, were dropped from an aircraft. Examination of these packages showed they contained mail from allied prisoners, at Rabaul.

An accompanying message from their Japanese captors is reported to have read : -

" To Army Headquarters, Port Moresby.
We have granted our prisoners of war permission to write a letter to their homes in order to relieve anxiety of their families about the welfare of their beloved ones. This bomb of letters we are confident will never fail to receive a warm welcome from all the addressees. The letters are left unsealed for the convenience of censorship on your side. We sincerely hope that by your good offices the letters will find their way to their respective destinations.
Signed : the Japanese Headquarters".

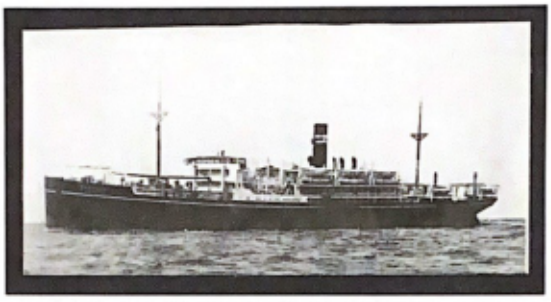
These covers were all registered by the Australian Postmaster General's department, presumably to ensure safe delivery. They were all cancelled with a Registered / Melbourne / 2 datestamp of 14th May 1942.

The covers bear a boxed "Service of Prisoners of War" cachet and a blue printed "Bulk Postage" registration label (missing from this cover). These letters were unsealed when dropped at Port Moresby but were apparently sealed by the time they reached Melbourne, as they were opened for examination by the civil censor in the traditional manner at the left hand side.
Re-sealed with a Smith type 3-7 label tied by a Smith type 3-10 cachet, numbered V58.

NEW GUINEA

THE MONTEVIDEO MARU

This 7267 ton steamship was built in Nagasaki, Japan, for the OSK shipping line, for their trans-Pacific route to South America. She was launched in 1926.



On 1st July 1942 she was torpedoed off the coast of the Philippines by the USS Sturgeon, captained by Lt Comm. W. Wright, USN. He would have had no knowledge of its cargo.

Precise figures of those who perished in Australia's worst maritime shipping incident were imprecise until 2012, when the Japanese made available a nominal list of persons on board. 1054 PoW's died, including 178 NCO's, 667 soldiers and 207 civilians including missionaries. The PoW's were locked below decks in the hold and stood no chance of survival.

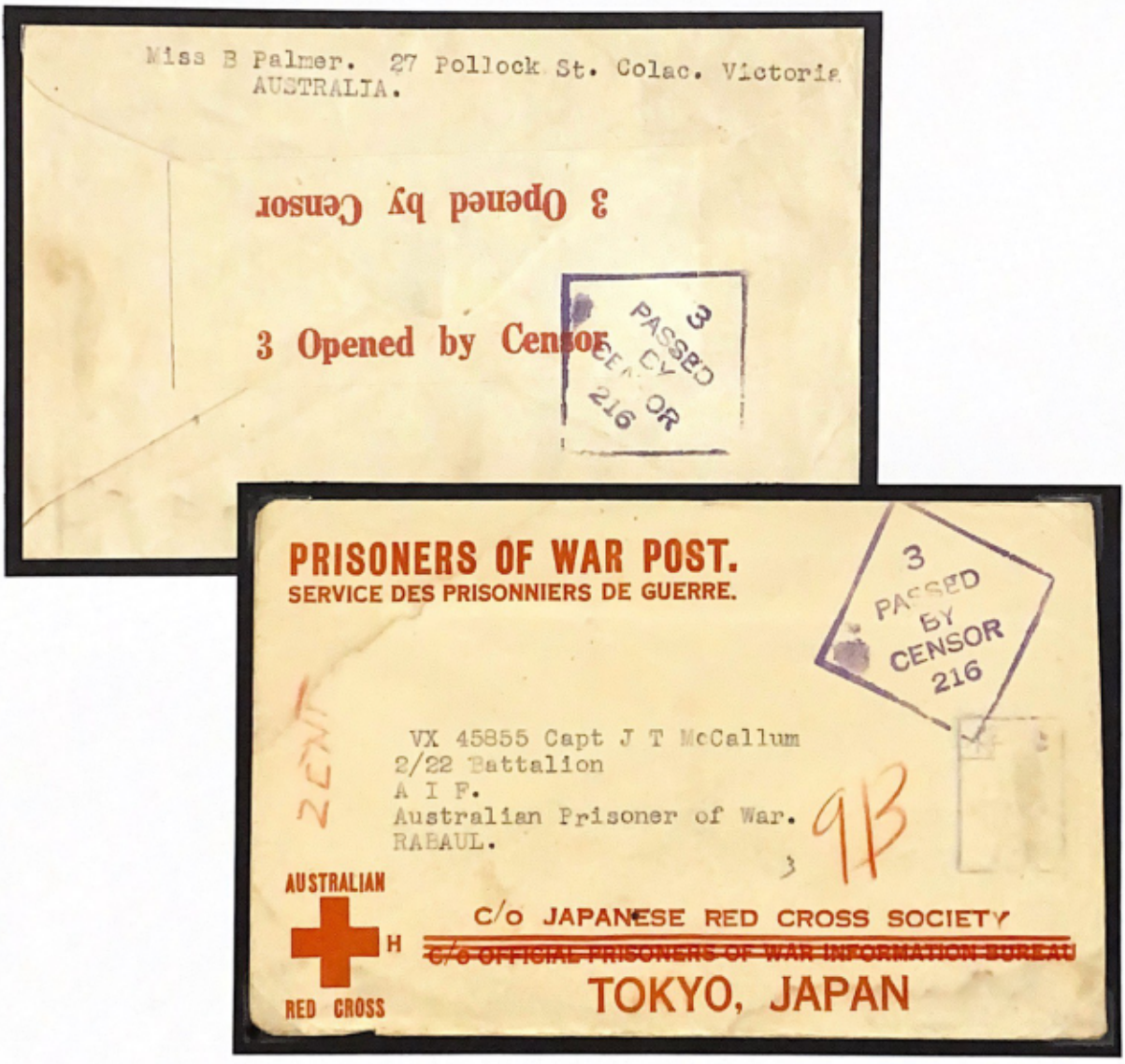
The Reverend Arthur Harry Voyce, of the Methodist Missionary Society of New Zealand, and a noted philatelist, was instrumental in getting the cover below issued 30 years after the disaster.

NEW GUINEA

LARK FORCE

PRISONER OF WAR MAIL

An Australian Red Cross cover addressed to a surviving officer of Lark Force at Rabaul.
Censored in Melbourne with a Smith type 3-7 label tied with diamond 3 /16 cachet.
9B indicating the PoW camp in the Rabaul area of New Britain.
The Red Cross envelope is of an early type used in 1942 but otherwise the cover is undated.



The surviving officers of Lark Force were transported to Japan on the S.S. Maruto Maru some 2 weeks after the embarkation of the S.S. Montevideo Maru. They were also attacked by the USS Sturgeon but escaped. Captain McCallum survived the war, being discharged from the army on 10/12/1945.

Ivan Wilkinson April 2023