

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Montevideo Maru

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (4.27 p.m.)—Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, what a pleasure it is to be the same chamber as you. I rise to ask the government to commit the necessary funds to find *Montevideo Maru*, which lies about 100 kilometres west of Cape Luzon in the Philippines and is the largest maritime disaster in Australian history. I know that Steve Ciobo, the member for Moncrieff, joins me in my call. By way of history, in January 1942 the Japanese army invaded Rabaul on the island of New Britain and quickly defeated the small Australian garrison, Lark Force. About 160 Australian soldiers who surrendered were massacred. On 22 June, the Japanese ordered 845 Australian POWs and 208 civilian internees to board the Japanese ship the *Montevideo Maru* for transport to Japan. The ship bore no markings to indicate it was a prisoner of war vessel.

On 1 July 1942 an American submarine, the USS *Sturgeon*, attacked and sank the *Montevideo Maru*, unaware that more than 1,000 prisoners of war were locked in the hull. The submarine commander, Lieutenant William 'Bull' Wright, had no way of knowing the ship was carrying Allied troops and civilians. There were no apparent survivors; nor was the tragic loss of life given any credence by the Japanese government at the time. At the end of the war, most of the families of the missing POWs expected them to be liberated in Rabaul. However, on arrival of the Australian troops in Rabaul, other than four civilian survivors and the missionaries, no trace could be found of the military and civilian prisoners who were in Rabaul three years earlier.

When investigations started in Rabaul, prisoners such as Gordon Thomas and Bishop Scharmach told of the sailing of the Japanese ship *Montevideo Maru*. Scharmach's book, *This Crowd Beat Us All*, states he was informed by Japanese officers in 1942 that the men were on the *Montevideo Maru*. As the investigations in Rabaul were beginning, a Japanese-speaking Australian officer, Major Williams, was ordered to investigate the overall casualties, movement and disposal. The history we know was basically written by Major Williams. He arrived in Japan and found a document from the Prisoner of War Information Bureau—a letter sent on 6 January 1945, stating that 845 prisoners of war and civilians were sunk with the *Montevideo Maru*.

But there is still uncertainty. Many believe there were two ships. Many believe that the prisoners were massacred in Rabaul or massacred with Lark Force. Many believe they died in prisoner-of-war camps. Twice as many Australians died in this single incident as in the entire Vietnam War. Four hundred more died than on the HMAS *Sydney*. It is the greatest disaster at sea suffered by Australians.

We need to find the ship to verify that indeed it went down with the loss of so many lives. We need to provide comfort and certainty to the now thousands of family and extended family members who still live with the great uncertainty of what happened to their loved ones. The lone survivor detailed the wrenching cries as trapped Australians went down and others sang *Auld Lang Syne*. We need to find the ship.