

INTRODUCTION

'This great sorrow'

In June 1942 the Japanese ship *Montevideo Maru* set sail from Rabaul. Its destination was Hainan, an island Japan had occupied off the southern coast of China. The cargo of 845 prisoners of war (POW) and 200 civilian internees was intended for use as slave labour. After *Montevideo Maru* had been at sea barely a week, a US submarine torpedoed it; there was nothing to mark the freighter as a POW transport, and as such it was a legitimate military target. Almost all the prisoners were sealed in the ship's hull, and there was no chance of escape. The stricken vessel caught fire and sank within 11 minutes.

The sinking of *Montevideo Maru* was one of Australia's greatest wartime disasters. It remains the greatest single loss of Australian lives at sea. The fate of men captured at Rabaul remained a mystery until after the war. Rabaul was one of the first island garrisons to be overwhelmed by the Japanese advance through South-East Asia; its airfields and harbour were captured in January 1942, weeks before the fall of Singapore. It was not until 1946 that Major Harry Williams, an officer seconded to the Australian Prisoner of War Contact and Enquiry Unit in Tokyo, discovered a nominal list of *Montevideo Maru*'s ill-fated passengers and forwarded details home to Australia. The original list was lost and the accuracy of Williams' report soon came into question. Long after the war, families still harboured agonising doubts. Had their son or husband died at sea or in battle? Had they perished in a Japanese work camp somewhere in the 'Far East'? Had they been executed? Some even thought they might still be alive. Doreen Beadle believed that her brother Fred escaped the mass killings at Rabaul and hid for a time in the jungle. 'For years we were hoping that he got away', she said, 'and was hiding on the islands, maybe with amnesia.' For Doreen Beadle, the recent acquisition of *Montevideo Maru*'s shipping lists, which included Fred's name, ended all such speculation. 'The government hid the story for many years', she insisted, 'and there was this great sorrow that you couldn't talk about.' The release of the list by the National Archives of Australia, and the creation of a website designed to 'gather stories' about men lost on *Montevideo Maru*, loaned a kind of finality to her family's story. The list was acquired only in May 2012, a (somewhat belated) gesture of reconciliation from the Japanese Government. Whatever its provenance, *Montevideo Maru*'s records opened a long-overdue forum for descendants of POWs.¹

What function does that forum serve? Memorial notices solicited from relatives situate these men as members of the families they still belong to: he was 'the second son of Arthur and Winifred', 'brother of Eric', 'husband of Jean', 'son of Richard and

Emma', 'fondly remembered by all he left behind'. Families were encouraged to post the few surviving photographs they had. From the day the site was launched, sepia images sealed in ageing albums were uploaded into cyberspace. They show pictures of men in khaki swinging on garden gates, fading photographs of weddings and christenings, a smiling father lifting his daughter on to his shoulders, a young man in a slouch hat posing proudly beside his wife. Some offer personal anecdotes. 'Brave and determined Uncle Bill' was an 'adventurer' and explorer; Kevin's Uncle Charles loved the dogs and the boxing; Bruce Gilchrist fired the first anti-aircraft rounds on Japanese fighters over Australian territory. But the abiding note of most of these messages is absence and the blunt reality of a life cut tragically short. 'Vic was married to my mother, Winifred Scott in May 1941,' one contributor wrote. 'She was 20 at the time. They were together for 4 months before he was shipped out.' 'Wilf' Pearce became a father on 2 January 1942, 'but never got to meet his new daughter'. These men were sorely missed and 'greatly loved' by uncles, siblings, cousins, parents.

Several visitors to the website recorded their last memories of these men or the terrible moment when families learnt of their loss. Lorraine was five when Uncle Bert went overseas: '[H]e came to say goodbye to Mum and Dad, and he carried me on his shoulders.' Jan remembered her mother weeping when she heard her brother was on *Montevideo Maru* when it was torpedoed. '[D]ad is 99', one relative wrote, 'but he still carries a photo of Keith in his Bible.' Many noted the long wait for news after their relative was posted missing: three and half years it took and really only now they knew 'for certain'. Only two contributors reached for the word 'closure', although that was the favoured theme of many a newspaper columnist.²

The word they used instead was 'confirmation'. The publication of *Montevideo Maru's* shipping list, the digitisation of the original Japanese indent and, finally, the release of passenger photographs, leaves no room for doubt. And in some ways, a visit to the website has come to serve the purpose of a pilgrimage. Here families lay their tributes, pledge 'never to forget', gather (albeit virtually) among a community of mourners, and situate their own family stories within a wider national narrative of loss. Visiting the website may well be as close to an actual pilgrimage as most relatives get. None of the dead were recovered, and the wreck of *Montevideo Maru* lies somewhere in the South China Sea. But that does not discourage everyone. Despite being 94 years of age and confined to a wheelchair, Doreen Beadle attended an Anzac Day service in Rabaul the year the lists were published. She made her way to *Montevideo Maru's* memorial in Bitu Paka War Cemetery and viewed the names of all the victims, Fred's included, arrayed on 30 columns. 'It was healing to be able to touch his name,' she said. Touching a name etched in stone seemed far more comforting than viewing it in cyberspace.³

This book is a study of those who visit the traumascapes of war: its battlefields and memorials, work camps and prisons, abandoned airfields and carefully tended cemeteries.⁴ Its subjects are those who define themselves as ‘pilgrims’, a self-conscious community (like the descendants of men lost on *Montevideo Maru*) with some deeply felt connection to the site concerned. The use of the word ‘pilgrim’ may seem slightly anachronistic. No one is suggesting for a moment that Chaucer’s pilgrimage to Canterbury is historically the *same* experience as laying a wreath at a Cross of Sacrifice; many of the respondents surveyed here professed no deep religious faith, all being the products of a far more secular age. Nonetheless ‘pilgrimage’ is the word they choose to describe their journey. It captured the sense of a quest, often an ordeal, a journey (as Victor and Edith Turner’s classic formulation put it) ‘out of the normal parameters of life [and] entry into a different, other world’.⁵

This sample includes veterans walking former battlefields, prisoners returning to sites of punishment and incarceration, widows and parents grieving for a young man’s loss, distant relatives seeking to solve a ‘mystery’ of their family’s past. A family connection (as again the *Montevideo Maru* site attests) motivates many of these pilgrims, but certainly not all of them. Amateur historians engrossed in the mythology of Anzac, schoolchildren charged with researching the life and death of a soldier, and those who nursed or befriended men damaged by war also figure in this sample. Of course, the memorials and battlefields of World War II attract other kinds of visitors: in Europe, Asia and Africa alike these places appear as ‘optional extras’ in ever-expansive tour itineraries. Alongside earnest pilgrims walk casual sightseers, backpackers far more interested in beaches than cemeteries, the curious and disinterested, bored and adventurous. Mary’s sentiments, posted defiantly on a website, convey the expectations of this particular cohort: ‘We did not go to Sandakan to relive the past, we went to see the old man of the forest, the orang-outangs.’ It says much about the industry of modern tourism that Mary’s coach cruised seamlessly from a nature reserve to a POW death camp. And no doubt there is much in her testimony and experience that merits the interest of tourism scholars. But this book is not about Mary or other casual visitors.⁶ While pilgrimage and tourism have always travelled together, these are qualitatively different kinds of journeys.⁷

Nor is this the kind of journey undertaken by what Peter Stanley calls the ‘hard-headed military historian’. When professional historians ‘sniff the ground’ (as Stanley puts it) they do so to better understand a battle. Where were the guns sited; what was the range of enemy artillery; ‘where were their flanking units’? These questions may or may not matter to a pilgrim walking the ground where a father, grandfather or uncle was killed. Many would wish to understand a battle’s progress in order to appreciate the circumstances of ‘their’ soldier’s death. But a pilgrim’s journey will

centre on memorials and cemeteries more than it will on what military tacticians call 'killing zones'. Stanley concedes that it is important for people to 'experience' the heat and humidity of South-East Asia or to 'get their knees brown' trekking the desert of North Africa. Confronting the conditions under which men fought pays off in 'historical insight'. A pilgrim by contrast seeks an emotional connection to people, places and events lost in the past. It is telling that Stanley's *Guide to Exploring Australian Battlefields* spends barely a few pages examining cemeteries and pilgrimages. He focuses on the physical landscape of war rather than the emotional aftermath. The kind of book that Stanley has written is most useful and appropriate for this kind of battlefield visitor, but it is a highly selective and gendered testimony (battlefield experts are almost invariably men), and it offers no understanding of the commemorative architecture that frames remembrance or of the emotional investment many pilgrims bring to these places. In short, it is not a history of pilgrimage.⁸

As the differences with Stanley's study suggest, this book fills a significant gap in studies of war and remembrance. There is now a substantial literature on pilgrimages to the battlefields and cemeteries of the Great War. A comparable study of World War II sites is conspicuous by its absence. Yet visits to these sites began even before the war ended and continue to this day. As World War II receives increasing prominence in the way we define Australians' experiences of war, a pilgrimage to Kokoda or Crete or Hellfire Pass may one day come to rival the much-travelled path to Gallipoli.⁹

The geographical scope of these journeys is daunting. The graves of Australian servicemen and women killed in World War II are scattered across the globe. Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) sources confirm that some 28 000 *identified* graves are located in more than 40 different countries. Nor is every site of pilgrimage a cemetery. Of some 10 000 airmen killed in World War II, the bodies of more than 3000 were never recovered; Australia's navy (and its merchant marine) lost more than 2000 men – many of these bodies surrendered to the deep. Denied a grave, families seek out derelict airfields in the north of Australia or the south of Britain; they journey to the coast of Western Australia and stand by the memorial raised to HMAS *Sydney* to gaze at the ocean that claimed her.

The choice of pilgrimage site varies with every particular pilgrim: a track in the jungle where prisoners were marched to their deaths; a grove of olives where an uncle may have been buried; a stretch of desert too vast to imagine. Each of these warscapes are what scholars have called 'active sites of memory', open to interrogation and interpretation by different groups and different generations. What do Kokoda, Crete and Tobruk mean to the men who fought there? How do their memories of war differ from those of men who endured long and brutal years of

confinement and forced labour under the Japanese? Why have their families felt a need to return to these places, to walk in the shadow of memory? What do widows, children and grandchildren choose to forget and long to remember?

The ‘shadow of memory’ is an appropriate phrase. Few of the contributors to the *Montevideo Maru* website had any personal recollection of the men killed 60 years ago. Most spoke of a ‘family memory’, stories (as one put it) passed ‘along the generations’, nurtured, treasured and no doubt embellished along the way. In a strict sense, these were not memories at all. A memory is something only an individual can experience, and phrases much in fashion in the academy – ‘collective memory’, ‘national memory’, ‘cultural memory’ – suggest more than they explain. There is a vast literature on memory, and much of it (as one scholar has quipped) is ‘not very memorable’. We have drawn a clear and necessary distinction in this project between what veterans (or, for that matter, children or grandchildren) actually remember and what Marianne Hirsch has called the ‘postmemory’ of others. ‘Postmemory’ is a form of retrospective remembrance, those family stories that (as the examples from *Montevideo Maru* confirm) have come to assume a life of their own.¹⁰

We have organised this book around particular sites mindful that a sense of place is embodied in every pilgrimage. Part 1, ‘Captivity narratives’, is the largest section of the book for obvious reasons. It is not just that the scale of loss – more than 8000 Australians died as prisoners of the Japanese; around 30 per cent of fatalities – or the places associated with their deaths – Hellfire Pass, Sandakan and Singapore – loom so large in World War II mythology. ‘Captivity narratives’ is also the place where we outline many of the debates surrounding the nature of commemoration and examine the architecture of remembrance that frames all World War II cemeteries. Dedicated in June 1953, Labuan Cemetery in North Borneo was the first major World War II cemetery the Anzac Agency completed. It was also one of the first times (in either world wars) that the Australian Government funded a pilgrimage for a civilian representative.

The second part of this book, ‘Desert and island’, considers Australia’s first extended engagements in World War II and the way these campaigns came to be remembered. Throughout 1941–42 the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) fought in Bardia, El Alamein and Tobruk, staving off the German and Italian advance across North Africa. The 6th Division also served in Greece and Crete, an ill-conceived campaign often likened to the doomed assault on Gallipoli 26 years earlier. ‘Desert and island’ reminds us of the changing pattern of pilgrimage. Tobruk and El Alamein were opened up to regular tours in the early 2000s – the former was effectively closed to travellers as the domestic politics of Libya became more and more unstable. Visits to Crete, by contrast, peaked in the early twenty-first century, its proximity to Gallipoli enabling commemorative cruises across the

Aegean. The current financial plight of Greece may well affect the fortunes of this pilgrimage industry.

Part 3, 'Air and sea', considers pilgrimages to sites associated with Bomber Command and the crew of HMAS *Sydney*. Again, the scale of loss is confronting. Proportionally more men were killed in Bomber Command than in any of the branches of the armed forces; when *Sydney* went down in 1941 all 645 of the ship's company was lost with her. Two key commemorative events frame the discussion in these chapters: the discovery of the wrecks of *Sydney* and *Kormoran* in 2008, and the unveiling of a memorial to Bomber Command in London in 2012.

Part 4 shifts the focus to what is often called 'Australia's front line': the battlefields of Kokoda and the forward supply base in Darwin and the Northern Territory. The former demonstrates again the diverse motivations that lie behind visits to World War II battlefields. Trekking Kokoda is as much a feat of endurance as a solemn act of remembrance. Darwin, by contrast, shows how pilgrimage intersects with urban heritage: commemorative trails leading through the heart of the city take visitors on a journey through its wartime history.

This book deliberately departs from a chronological account of World War II to examine places in which fighting took place at overlapping points in time. Australia declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. The words chosen by the Australian Prime Minister – 'Great Britain has declared war upon her and ... as a result Australia is also at war' – signalled from the outset Australia's readiness to defend imperial interests. The first contingent of the Second AIF sailed for the Middle East in January 1940, but the first major action was fought by the Royal Australian Navy: the sinking of an Italian cruiser by HMAS *Sydney* in the Mediterranean in July 1940 (Italy had entered the war as an ally of the Axis in June). Australia's first major success on land was the capture of Bardia from Italian forces in January 1941. The siege of Tobruk began in April, as did the disastrous defence of Greece.

On the other side of the globe in November 1941, *Sydney* was sunk in a brief but savage action off the coast of Western Australia. Later that year, Japanese troops began a steady advance southward through Malaya and the Netherlands Indies. In February 1942 more than 80 000 Allied troops based in the supposedly impregnable fortress at Singapore surrendered to the Japanese. Japan's main aim was not to invade Australia but to secure Dutch oilfields and establish its own empire in the Asia-Pacific region. That was not how it seemed in a country long obsessed with 'yellow hordes' to the north. Alarmed by the swift defeat of British and Australian forces in Malaya and Singapore, and the bombing of Darwin a few days later, Prime Minister Curtin brought home what was left of the 6th and 7th Divisions.

On the other side of the world, the RAAF continued to fight over the skies of Europe until 1945. At the battle of El Alamein in October 1941 British and Australian forces halted Rommel's advance on Alexandria, turning the tide on the North African front. Australia's war effort shifted steadily to the Pacific. By July 1942 Japanese troops had landed on the northern coast of Papua New Guinea and Australia (aided by the Americans) struggled to curb their advance along the Kokoda Trail to Port Moresby. By January 1943 organised Japanese resistance in Papua had ended, but northern Australia, and Queensland in particular, remained the staging post for an Allied advance through the islands of the Pacific. For the remainder of the war, Australian troops fought under the supreme command of US General Douglas MacArthur; again Australia was a junior partner in a new imperial alliance.

Each of the campaigns noted here has been the subject of intense scrutiny by military historians. But remembering a conflict is not the same thing as arguing over how it was fought. This book begins with the experience of men taken prisoner by the Japanese because their families faced one of the longest and most painful ordeals of the war. The way they (and subsequent generations) reckoned with their loss inscribed the politics and structures of commemoration and remembrance. By the same token, this study necessarily privileges some sites of pilgrimage over others. Bardia was an important battle, but very few Australians have made their way there. Names emblazoned across banners carried on Anzac Day – battle honours like Lebanon and Tarakan – do not resonate in the way of Tobruk or Kokoda. Many are aware of the massacre of Australian nurses on Banka Island; few realise that 700 women were held at Muntok camp and that half these women died. Complex and intriguing questions surround the issue of which sites have come to be remembered and why. Clearly, though, it was not just the size of the battle or the number of fatalities. For reasons that range from domestic politics to climate and geography, some sites became places of pilgrimage whereas others did not.

Nor should we underestimate an element of agency among travellers themselves. The RSL pioneered pilgrimages to Borneo. As early as the mid-1980s Bruce Ruxton (president of the Victorian RSL) led family members and others from Sandakan to Ranau, retracing the route of the POW Death March. Initially these tours included extended visits to the 9th Division landing beaches in Brunei, places (Ruxton thought) that had as much potential as pilgrimage sites as the celebrated landing beach at Anzac. But developments soon persuaded him otherwise. In March 1991 an apologetic president of the Empire Service Association of Brunei wrote to his counterpart in the Victorian RSL: "There have been changes in Brunei recently which may well effect your decision to have an extended stay here ...

Brunei is now DRY.' The Association was able 'to stockpile some refreshments before the import ban came into effect', but apparently not enough to meet the requirements of Bruce Ruxton. The landing beaches concerned soon fell from the tour itineraries, and excursions to Sabah's scenic attractions (and amply stocked hotels) took their place.¹¹

There are many sites of (World War II) memory in Australia, including a monument to *Montevideo Maru* dedicated (by Australia's Governor-General) on the seventieth anniversary of her sinking. These sites range from the 11 'principal war cemeteries', each marked by a Cross of Sacrifice, to a 'Freedom Wall' built in Brisbane to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Allies' victory in the Pacific. They include museums, heritage-listed buildings (such as MacArthur's headquarters in Brisbane), even sportsgrounds where American and Australian forces camped. And most were community initiatives. In townships across Australia a new list of names and places was added to most local memorials, fusing the memory of World War II with that of World War I. Not all these sites are places of pilgrimage, and some (like the Freedom Wall) were quickly forgotten. This book chose Adelaide River Cemetery in the Northern Territory as a focus of study, linked as it is with the defence of the north and the memory of the bombing. We have also included sites in Western Australia dedicated to the memory of HMAS *Sydney*.¹²

This selection has therefore been determined by both the volume and frequency of visitation and the salience a particular site has in the popular mythology of World War II. These points are often, though not always, related. Sites have also been chosen to represent a range of experience. A motor tour of airfields in the English Midlands is a very different journey from a trek across the Owen Stanley Range. Walking the Thai–Burma railway beside a father who worked the line is different from imagining the ordeal of a great-uncle killed on the Death March from Sandakan.

This book also considers how these journeys have changed over time. In the immediate post-war period wives and veterans attended the dedication of virtually every significant cemetery, sometimes as guests of the government, often as private individuals. Before this the trail was blazed by the men who gathered in the bodies, the bags of bones exhumed from prisoner-of-war camps, the charred remains sifted from crash sites, bloated corpses tugged by an indifferent tide. How and why the fallen came to be commemorated is part of the story of Australian pilgrimage. And, as with every historical narrative, that story relies on the archives. Again, *Montevideo Maru's* story offers a useful point of reference. Doreen Beadle was certainly not the first person to visit the ill-fated ship's memorial. In July 1955, not long after the monument was erected, the mother of a man lost on *Montevideo Maru* made

her way to Bita Paka Cemetery. Her account was published in another set of documents held by the National Archives of Australia, in the monthly proceedings of the Imperial War Graves Commission. ‘Here lies so many of our boys from the 2/22nd Battalion’, she began:

When you enter the Cemetery you pass over an immense lawn dotted with Jacaranda trees; then through the gateway of exquisite Crotons and flowers, and up marble steps. Straight in front are ten panels, five on each side containing the names of those men whose graves are known only to God, and those who went down with the ‘MONTEVIDEO MARU’ [*sic*]. Ahead, between the panels, stands the Cross of Sacrifice. Looking down the list of names on the panels, which included that of my son, I felt they were not dead, but very much alive. Bita Paka must be seen, because its beauty could never be described.¹³

A desire to *see* those places and those names, and a belief that such a journey can help ‘heal’ the wounds of war, has motivated one generation of Australian pilgrims after another. This woman’s experience was certainly not the same as Mrs Beadle’s: her loss was more immediate, her grief more profound, her journey more taxing. Like every history, the story of Australian pilgrimage is an analysis of change over time. The differences and the continuities that unite or distinguish successive generations of pilgrims and the way some sites yield different meanings from others is a key focus of this project.

Alongside these actual journeys is a journey of the mind. Both Mrs Beadle and her anonymous predecessor *imagined* this site long before they visited it. In lounge-rooms across Australia, families read and reread the last letters they received from loved ones. They ordered pictures of tombstones and memorials from the Imperial War Graves Commission, sent floral tributes across the ocean, composed epitaphs for graves most grieving families could never hope to see. And today they visit websites offered by a range of public and private agencies.

The *Montevideo Maru* website is something of an innovation for the National Archives. This highlights an important point. The archival record is always a limited one. To access the testimony of today’s travellers one must look beyond neatly indexed sets of documents. In addition to the existing historical archive this project has created an archive of its own: interviews, oral histories, written and web-based surveys and a (shared) experience of pilgrimage inform this essentially ethnographic approach.¹⁴ Stories matter to historians – and how, where and why they are told matter as much as what is said. A few of these interviews were conducted in domestic spaces of the subject’s own choosing: a lounge-room in Melbourne, a cluttered

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Bruce Scates

Excerpt

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'a desire to see those places': the style of grave marker used in Bitia Paka cemetery and throughout much of South-East Asia. Pilgrims often liken the neat rows of plaques to soldiers on a parade ground. Naming missing men necessitated a separate memorial.

Source: Courtesy of Mike Goodwin