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Adjournment Debate
Montevideo Maru

One of my earliest invitations as an MLA was to attend a luncheon of the Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Society.

Truth telling is important to Indigenous people. Truth telling is also central to the story of the *Montevideo Maru*. I am indebted for my knowledge of this story to Hank Nelson and his very detailed history *Prisoners of War – Australians under Nippon*.

Rabaul, in 1942, was the headquarters of the Australian administration of the Territory of New Guinea. On 22 January 1942 a very large Japanese invasion overwhelmed the Australian Lark force. The Japanese gathered over 1000 prisoners of war and civilian internees in Rabaul; about 400 of Lark force escaped. On 22 June 1942 the civilian and military prisoners in Rabaul, except the officers and nurses, were loaded on the *Montevideo Maru*.

Off Luzon, early on the morning of 1 July she was torpedoed by the US submarine *Sturgeon*. Not one of the 845 prisoners of war or the 208 civilians survived.

This was Australia's greatest tragedy at sea.

Nearly 20% of all Australian prisoners of war who died did so at sea. Hank Nelson concludes that this was the cost of the warring nations failing to agree to give free passage to transports carrying prisoners, and of the persistence of the Japanese in shifting captives when they were completely unable to protect their shipping.

More than anything, the relatives and friends of those who died in and around Rabaul, in the New Guinea Islands and on the *Montevideo Maru*, whether they perished in the armed forces or as civilians caught in the maelstrom of war, seek some form of tangible official recognition.

These young men gave their lives to fight for their country and protect their families. Grandchildren still feel the sadness of their parents' and grandparents' loss. Knowing soldiers are valued and honoured from previous battles must also help tremendously with troop morale.

The events were catastrophic for both the residents of the New Guinea islands, then an Australian administered territory, and the troops of Lark Force and the 1 Independent Coy sent to the islands in early 1941. Families were torn apart, loved ones were missing and there were many unanswered questions.

In early 1942 the Australians were ill prepared for the Japanese onslaught and the New Guinea islands were sacrificed.

A permanent Australian national memorial will provide the men who died with a lasting tribute and the honourable recognition they deserve.

Relatives and loved ones of the 1,034 lost had to wait for many years to hear the truth. Too many years of not knowing what happened.

The *Montevideo Maru* must be remembered as our greatest tragedy at sea. Governments must learn from the anguish of the relatives and be honest and open about disasters.

As a politician, although I trust I will never encounter such a disaster, it is an instructive example for me to remember. The principles of honesty and openness learnt from the fate of the *Montevideo Maru* must apply to all aspects of public life.

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