

Chapter 5

Second World War

The Men on the Roll of Honour

*Their crosses form a picket fence,
So close they lie together
And mates that dug both grave and trench
Now lie in each forever.*

*Not for them this sad descent from grace.
Not for them this feeling out of place.
Not for them to sit and wonder why.
Not for them, whose time, too young to die.*

Anzac Day
Ronald J Hunt

In the 1941 Annual Report of the Country Roads Board (CRB) the following statement was made:

'Due to enlistments in the Navy, Army, and Air Force, the calling up of trainees for national service and the transfer of a number of technical officers to Defence Departments, a strain was placed on the Board's staff. The Board desires to express its appreciation of the efforts of the staff in carrying on under considerable difficulties, involving much overtime and close concentration. Notwithstanding that the Board's normal programme of work has been considerably reduced, the diminution in the programme was offset to a large extent by the large volume of defence works carried out on behalf of the Commonwealth Government.'

The total number of officers and employees of the Board who had enlisted for active service abroad with the second A.I.F., R.A.A.F., and Naval Forces was 235.'

In the 1945 Annual Report the following statement was made:

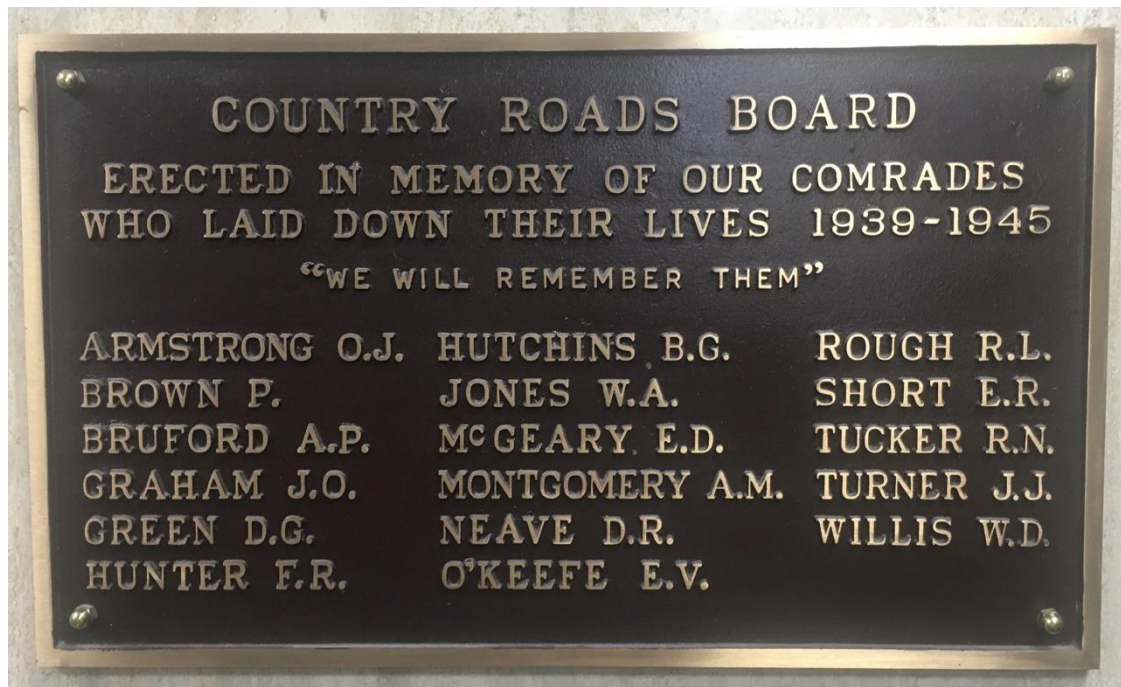
'With deep regret the Board records that nine members of its staff paid the supreme sacrifice during the war. Each of the officers was a young man of more than ordinary ability and great promise, to whom the Board looked to fill important positions in the future. The heartfelt sympathy of the Board and staff goes out to their families in the loss they have sustained.'

During the war period 48 members of the staff and 590 employees joined the fighting services.

With the cessation of hostilities, the Board is now awaiting the release of officers and' employees still in the services with a view to their returning to their normal duties.

For several years a great deal of apprehension was felt for the welfare of certain members of the Board's staff who were prisoners of war. It is with a feeling of great joy that reference can now be made to the fact that all of these officers have been released. Heartiest congratulations are offered to them and to their families on their safety, and the hope is expressed that they will not suffer any permanent disability as a result of their unenviable experiences.'

Those who were killed in active service in the Second World War as recorded on the CRB Roll of Honour are:



It is heartbreaking to think that all these young men lost their lives, far from home and far from the people who loved them. Those who loved them would have carried their remorse to their graves and after them, they are largely forgotten.

Here are their stories listed in alphabetical order as they are on the Roll of Honour.

Lance Sergeant Oliver John Armstrong, VX 29137

Oliver was nearly 32 when he enlisted at Sale in June 1940. He came from Johnsonville (in Gippsland) and he gave his vocation as 'Bridge construction'. He was born in Swan Reach in East Gippsland in September 1908.

He did his initial training in Bendigo and Seymour and then transferred to Sydney where he embarked on 2 February 1941 on a ship, identified in the archive as '2 M', for Singapore. He was hospitalised with malaria – three times - and pyrexia (fever).



Oliver Armstrong's enlistment photograph – 1940.

He was appointed Lance Sergeant while serving in Malaya with the 2nd/10th Field Company and was killed in action on 14 February 1942. His Burial Return certificate indicates he was killed in the Cathay Buildings in Singapore and he was temporarily buried with a sealed bottle containing his particulars. He is now buried at the Kranji War Cemetery in Singapore.

His death was conveyed to his sister in Wantirna because the record said that his mother, Una, was not in good enough health to receive the news. Poor Una. She lost Oliver's older brother, Arthur, in the First World War in France in July 1916. Another younger brother, Alfred, tried to enlist but was rejected as medically unfit for service, but he died two years later when a tree fell on him.

In his will Oliver said 'I give all my property to Una May Armstrong to be divided as she thinks best'. On Anzac Day 2019, Oliver was mentioned in a broadcast on the ABC as having a keen sense of humour, despite contracting malaria while serving in Singapore. Apparently Arthur had always dreamed of settling down in Gippsland with his sweetheart, Hilda.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL P12496.001



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL DA10492

Two brothers, two wars, two deaths and one broken family.
Lance Sergeant Oliver John Armstrong (ex-CRB) and his brother, Sergeant Arthur William Armstrong.



Oliver John Armstrong and his burial place, Kranji War Cemetery, Singapore.

Private Patrick (Paddy) Brown, VX26172

The only Patrick Brown that I could find on the Commonwealth War Graves database who enlisted in Victoria and who was killed in action was Private Patrick Brown VX26172. He was born in Londonderry in Northern Ireland in 1902. He was a Special Constable in the Ulster Special Constabulary during the troubles in the 1920s in Londonderry and emigrated to Australia in the

mid 1920s. I can't be certain that he is the one on the Roll of Honour as he gave his occupation as 'miner'.



Paddy Brown (marked with x) on the emigration ship to Australia.

Collection of his great nephew – Peter McCandless

He lived in Carlton but enlisted in Caulfield in June 1940. He commenced in No. 8 Training Depot in Albury and in August he joined 2/23rd Australian Infantry Battalion. He arrived in the Middle East in December 1940 and was killed in action (machine-gunned by a German aircraft) on the Derna Road in Libya on 5 April 1941. At this time, the 2/23rd was proceeding towards Tobruk. He was 39 years old. He is buried near the place where he fell.



Patrick Brown – portrait migrated from key photograph.

His file in the National Archives of Australia contains a sealed envelope which I was unable to view. I have no ideas about its contents.

He is commemorated at the Alamein Memorial in Egypt.



Alamein Memorial where Patrick Brown is buried.

I have no information about his employment with the CRB so there is some doubt about the authenticity of this man being the one on the CRB Honour Roll.

His niece, Agnes Long, of Londonderry in Northern Ireland wrote to the Australian Army in 2000 seeking details of his war service and custody of his service medals. She explained that Patrick was unmarried and the only relatives he had were in Northern Ireland.

Lance Corporal Alexander Peter Romilly Bruford, VX 60359

Alexander was engaged by the Board as a junior draftsman in February 1939 and he enlisted with the AIF in August 1941.



Alexander Bruford's enlistment photograph – 1941.

He was born in Hawthorn in 1922 and became a Lance Corporal in the 2nd/5th Independent Company – later to become the 2nd/5th Commando Squadron. This company was intensively trained in irregular warfare for use in sabotage and reconnaissance roles. It was formed in 1942 after Japan had entered the war. No. 7 Infantry Training Centre was established at Wilsons Promontory in Victoria. The terrain surrounding the centre consisted of high rugged mountains, swift streams and swamps making it ideal for training soldiers in the art of guerrilla warfare.



No.7 Infantry Training Centre in Victoria at Wilson's promontory. Mount Oberon in the background was used by the company as part of its physical training course.

The company departed Townsville in Queensland, in April 1942 on the SS *Taroona* bound for Port Moresby in New Guinea. They arrived in the middle of an air raid. They were deployed a month later to Wau, in a valley inland from Lae and Salamaua. They were part of Kanga Force that consisted of the 2nd/5th, the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles and a platoon from the 1st Independent Company. Their task was to observe and harass the Japanese at Lae and Salamaua.

They were the first Allied force in the Second World War to be flown into action as a complete unit. Despite appalling conditions, enduring soaking and tropical conditions – and with scant food supplies and medication - they continually harassed the Japanese in the area. At the end of June 1942, the company launched a raid on a Japanese aerodrome at Salamaua. This was the first Allied attack on Japanese land forces anywhere. The raiders formed into several parties each with mortar support. Heavy rain fell throughout their approach during the night, but it later cleared and early the following morning, the Australians attacked various areas between the Francisco River and Kela Point, destroying buildings, vehicles and a bridge. The Japanese lost 100 men while only three Australians were wounded. During the raid, a Japanese pilot, attempting to reach his aircraft, ran into the commandos and was killed. Important documents were found in a satchel carried by the pilot and these were sent to Kanga Force headquarters for analysis.

An attack on Heath's Plantation, the following night was not as successful as the element of surprise had been lost. Following the raids, the Japanese heavily shelled Kela Point and attacked

the tracks leading away from Salamaua by air in an effort to cut off the raiders' withdrawal routes. The Australians withdrew from Butu to their main camp, as the Japanese sent patrols of up to 90 men into the foothills; they subsequently found the camp at Butu and destroyed it.

Alexander died on 24 July 1942 of injuries sustained during the campaign. He was 19. He is buried in the Lae War Cemetery in Papua New Guinea.

Alexander was the son of Captain Alexander Romilly Bruford, MC (1889 – 1934). Alexander Senior was born in Hawthorn and was a civil engineer and building surveyor. At the time of his death he was the City Engineer at Hawthorn where he served for 14 years. He died of influenza. Previous appointments were in the Shire of Warracknabeal and the City of Fitzroy. He served in the 14th Battalion as a lieutenant and was awarded the Military Cross at Bois de Vaires east of Corbie on 18 June 1918. On his return from the war, he was closely associated with the formation of the Returned Soldiers League. His early death relieved him of the pain of losing his son six years later.



Lae War Cemetery where Alexander (Junior) is buried.

Flight Lieutenant John Oswald Graham, 418101

John was born in in 1916 in Mont Albert and was a Pay Clerk with the CRB when he enlisted in April 1942. He had a BCom from the University of Melbourne. His initial postings were Cootamundra, West Sale and Nhill. He became a Leading Aircraftman in July 1942. He married his wife, Joyce, in 1942.

His brother, D. S. Graham, was a Wing Commander in the RAAF.

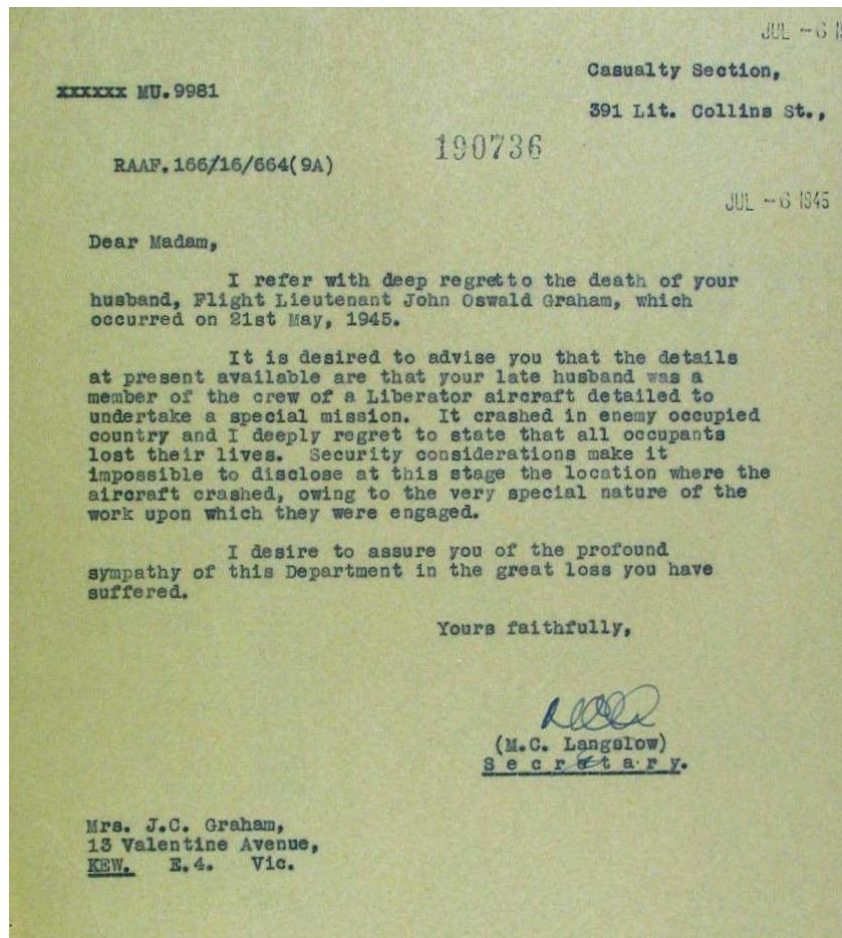
Flight Lieutenant John Oswald Graham of the Royal Australian Air Force died on 21 May 1945 aged 28 years and he is buried at Labuan War Cemetery in Malaysia.



John Oswald Graham.

He died on a secret operation in North Borneo in No. 200 Flight Liberator aircraft A72-177. It was lost at 0555 hours on 21 May 1945 with the crew of Flight Lieutenant Keith Emmett and Z Special Force personnel on a Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD) sortie. In fine weather and on the fifth pass of a supply mission to the Bawing Drop Zone, the aircraft struck a tall tree on a hill to the south east of the zone and crashed, killing all 14 people on board. A witness report compiled by Major R. Combe states that the aircraft appeared to be flying low with engines

unthrottled leading up to the accident. The aircraft crashed two miles west of the village of Melabong.



This was the original letter sent to John's wife about the circumstances of the crash.

A similar one was sent to his parents.

The bodies were temporarily buried at the site and photographs were taken of the graves and sent to the next of kin.



John's temporary grave

ENCL. 20A

Casualty Section
391 Lit. Collins St.,
OCT 23 1945

XXXXXXXXXXXX MU.9981
217894

RAAF.166/16/664(20A)

Dear Madam,

I refer to previous correspondence with regard to your late son, Flight Lieutenant John Oswald Graham, who was killed in air operations in Borneo on the 21st May, 1945.

Your son was a member of the crew of a Liberator aircraft engaged in dropping supplies in enemy occupied territory in British North Borneo in co-operation with the Australian Military Forces.

The aircraft made five circuits at low altitude over the target area and the supplies were dropped successfully.

After the completion of the fifth circuit the aircraft struck the top of a tall tree and crashed. In the opinion of an eye-witness all the occupants were killed instantly.

The accident took place two miles west of Melabong village at 06 degrees 58 minutes north, longitude 117 degrees 07 minutes east.

All the occupants were buried at the scene of the crash and the graves clearly marked with crosses.

A photograph showing a tribute of respect paid at the graveside is enclosed.

I trust that the above information may be of some comfort to you in your sorrow.

Yours faithfully,
(Signature)
(I. C. Langslow)
SECRETARY

Enc.
Mrs A. I. Graham,
13 Valentine Avenue,
KEW. E. 4. VIC.

D. P. S. CASUALTY SECTION
20/10

This letter to John's mother, was written after the war and explains in more detail, the circumstances of her son's death

John's file in the National Archives comprises 41 pages, the majority of which relate to his death.

Trooper Donald Charles Green, VX111592

The Roll of Honour name is D.G. Green but I could not find a record for him in either the Commonwealth War Graves or the Australian Archives. However I found Donald Charles Green who was born in June 1919 in Bruthen in East Gippsland - who described himself as a labourer. He may be the right one. The Honour Roll may have mistaken the 'C' as a 'G'.

He enlisted in January 1942 at the age of 23 and was attached to the 2nd Armoured Training Regiment. Among other training, he did a course on cookery and he was appointed a Group II Cook at Bendigo. He did further training at Watsonia in October 1942 before returning to Bendigo.

Then, quite abruptly, the file stated that Donald was accidentally drowned at Rochester. The enquiry stated: "*Drowned at Rochester 15.1.43 when engaged in a military exercise on duty. No evidence of negligence.*"

He is buried in the Bendigo Civil Cemetery.

Sergeant Frederick (Paul) D'Orsa Hunter, 400504

I think the initials 'F.R.' shown on the Honour Roll are incorrect. There are 44 entries for the surname 'Hunter' on the Department of Veteran Affairs Nominal Roll with a first name starting with an 'F', and of those from Victoria only one of them was killed in the Second World War. He was Frederick D'Orsa Hunter and his story seems to fit. His file has a red diagonal cross over the front cover with the word 'Deceased' on it.

Frederick was born in St Kilda in 1920. He enlisted in the RAAF in September 1940 when he was 19. It was noted that he spent three or four years working as a Junior Clerk doing general office duties. He attended Christian Brothers' College in East St Kilda and passed his Intermediate Certificate with passes in English, Latin, Physics, Algebra, Geometry and Trigonometry, and Arithmetic. In the first four subjects he gained a first class pass. He failed French. He was a keen sportsman and played football and cricket with the Catholic Young Men's Society in West St Kilda as well as tennis, squash and swimming.

Like many Australian airmen, Frederick was sent to Canada for training as an Air Observer. He embarked from Sydney on 28 December 1940. He enlisted with the RCAF in Edmonton in December 1940 and embarked for England in June 1941 where he joined 10 Squadron Leeming in December 1941.

In May 1942, he was attached to No. 35 Squadron (RAF), at Linton-on-Ouse in north Yorkshire. At 2200 hours on the night of 19 May 1942, Halifax W1101 took off from Linton-on-Ouse to bomb Mannheim, Germany. Nothing was heard from the aircraft after take-off and it failed to return. The aircraft crashed near Mannheim and all seven crew members were killed. Frederick was 21.



Frederick D'Orsa Hunter.

At the end of the war, the Royal Air Force Missing Research and Enquiry Service sent an investigations officer to find the missing aircraft. It and the remains of the crew were located and buried locally with wooden crosses. They were disinterred on 14 October 1947, and reburied at Durnbach War Cemetery in Bavaria.

His family had this epitaph engraved into his headstone: "His life a beautiful memory, his absence a silent sorrow. R.I.P."



Frederick's headstone at Durnbach War cemetery.

Having researched and written this entry for Frederick, there is still some doubt as to whether this is the right person (or not). I notice in very small writing, an entry on his Application for Air Crew, Frederick has written "At present engaged as buyer for Company of Steel Merchants" which means he may not have worked for the CRB after all. But this memory of him is worth telling.

Leading Aircraftman Bernard George Hutchins, 408654

Bernard was appointed in March, 1936, to the clerical staff of the CRB. He joined the RAAF in May, 1941. He came from Elsternwick and died on 14 October 1941. He was 23 years old. He was killed in a training accident. At the time of his death, Bernard was posted to No 6 Service Flying School, Mallala in South Australia.

No. 6 Service Flying Training School was a flying training school of the RAAF during the Second World War. It was formed in August 1941, and commenced flying the following month. Responsible for intermediate and advanced instruction of pilots, the school operated Avro Anson and Airspeed Oxford aircraft. The school formed a reserve squadron for Australia's defence after the outbreak of the Pacific war in December 1941. It graduated over 2,000 pilots.

Four airmen were killed in a mid-air collision of two Avro Anson aircraft. Bernard was one of them. The others were Pilot Officer Charles Somerville, Leading Aircraftman John Maslen and Sergeant Ian Blacker.

There were many deaths during training at No 6 Service Flight Training School, Mallala. George was involved in the first one but in February 1942, another four men were killed in similar circumstances. A few months later a lone airman was killed when his plane crashed during a heavy rainstorm. Another eight airmen died in a mid-air collision over the Murray River near Monteith. Then in September 1942, while on a night training exercise, another Anson crashed killing the pilot. In July 1943, another lone flyer was killed and two weeks later five airmen died when their plane crashed in the Gulf of St Vincent. A week later another lone airman perished and in September 1943 four men died in another crash.

The bodies of many of these men were sent back to their families. However in 1943, the government designated an area of the Mallala Cemetery as a War Graves site, after which time, deceased servicemen were buried there. Twelve men from the 6th Service Flight Training School are interred in the War Graves Cemetery at Mallala where their graves are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

An official enquiry was held regarding the flying accident in which Bernard was killed. The court found:

1. *The abovenamed airman was a member of the crew of Anson W 2254.*
2. *He was on duty at the time ofc the accident.*
3. *Accident was caused by lack of vigilance on the part of all Pilots and Pupil Pilots.*
4. *That the aircraft was camouflaged and the Court considers this is a contributing factor in the accident.*

Its final finding was that, in the future, all training planes are to be marked yellow.

Bernard is buried in the Burwood General Cemetery, Melbourne.

Private William Albert Jones, VX 38713

William served in the AIF 2nd/22nd Battalion and was killed on 1 July 1942 in New Guinea. He is commemorated at the Rabaul Memorial. He was born in London and was 41 years old when he died. He was not married as he named his sister as his next of kin.

William lived in Orbost in East Gippsland, Victoria, and described his occupation as 'Roadman' - and for his religion he said 'Sun Worshipper'. He left Sydney on HMT *Zealandia* on 18 April 1941 and disembarked in Rabaul eight days later.

Some historians describe the Rabaul garrison as a 'sacrificial lamb'. It was being defended by a group of Australian units known as Lark Force. It was left stranded without reinforcements, and instructed not to withdraw in accordance with official War Cabinet policy at the time. Harold Page was the senior government official in the territory. He was instructed to evacuate only "unnecessary" civilians and was refused permission to evacuate any administrative staff.

The objective of Lark Force, was to maintain a forward air observation line for as long as possible and to make the enemy fight for this line, rather than abandon it, even though it was considered the garrison was too small to withstand any Japanese invasion.

William was reported missing in 1942. His file has a dreaded stamp DECEASED and a written note 'presumed dead'. It noted that he went missing on 1 July 1942 and for official purposes was presumed dead. It then said '*Member on board Montevideo Maru.*' That was the last entry in the archive.

I can throw some light on these cryptic comments. As it turns out, my cousin, Arthur Simson, also served in Lark Force. Following an overwhelming Japanese bombardment, the garrison was destroyed and overrun by the Japanese ground invasion. The Australians were outnumbered five to one. Eighteen soldiers were awarded military honours in this battle including Arthur who was mentioned in dispatches.

The Lark Force commander ordered a withdrawal on the basis of every man for himself. Pairs, individuals and larger groups sought escape along the coast. Some found small boats or were picked up by bigger vessels and about 400 of the 1,400 strong unit made their way back to Australia. My cousin, Arthur Simson, was one of them.

About 160 Australians captured by the Japanese were massacred at Tol Plantation and another 863 were interned as prisoners of war. A fortunate handful of Australian officers were transported from Rabaul to Japan where they were eventually liberated.

However, most of the Australian prisoners of war lost their lives when an American submarine torpedoed the *Montevideo Maru* on 1 July 1942 as they were being transported to Hainan Island in China. Although the Japanese crew were ordered to abandon ship, it does not appear they made any attempt to assist the prisoners to do likewise. The ship sank within 10 minutes of being struck. The ship's lifeboats were launched but all capsized and one suffered severe damage. Of the 88 Japanese guards and crew, only 17 survived the sinking. All the prisoners perished.

Harold Page, the government administrator, also perished in the sinking of *Montevideo Maru*. Page's son, Robert, a member of 'Z' force was executed by the Japanese in 1945 for espionage.

In 2012, the Japanese government handed over thousands of POW documents to the Australian government including *Montevideo Maru's* manifest containing the names of all the Australians on board. The translation of the manifest was released in June 2012. There was a total of 1,054 Australians, of which 845 were from Lark Force. This number of deaths was nearly twice the number of Australian deaths in the entire Vietnam War.



Montevideo Maru troop transport.

So William Jones perished at sea. The sinking of *Montevideo Maru* is the worst maritime disaster in Australian history.

The Rabaul Memorial in Papua New Guinea takes the form of an avenue of stone pylons leading from the entrance building to the Cross of Sacrifice. Bronze panels bearing the names are affixed to the faces of the pylons. In July 2012 a new memorial was dedicated in the grounds of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Designed by noted Melbourne sculptor James Parrett, it commemorates those Australians who died in the defence of Rabaul, and those who later died as prisoners in the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*.



The Rabaul Memorial in Papua New Guinea.



The Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* memorial in Canberra.

In April 2023, 81 years after its sinking, the wreckage of *Montevideo Maru* was located on the seabed at a depth of 4,000 metres off the northwest coast of the island of Luzon in the Philippines archipelago.

The wreck will be left undisturbed, with no human remains or artefacts removed from it and the site recorded for research purposes out of respect for families. Australian army chief Lieutenant General Simon Stuart said the soldiers who fought to defend Rabaul met a terrible fate on the ship.

“Today we remember their service, and the loss of all those aboard, including the 20 Japanese guards and crew, the Norwegian sailors and the hundreds of civilians from many nations,” he said.

Private Ernest Desmond McGeary, VX 56416

Ernest McGeary was from Ballarat and was 25 years old when he died. He was born in Landsborough (near Ballarat) in October 1918. He enlisted in May 1941 and described himself as a labourer.



Ernest McGeary's enlistment photograph – 1941.

Ernest was a member of the 2nd/29th Battalion and he is commemorated at the Labuan memorial in Borneo, Malaysia. He embarked from Melbourne aboard HMT *EE* and arrived in Singapore on 15 August 1941 and was immediately hospitalised with mumps. He got into a bit of trouble with authorities in that he was charged with “*using violence to persons in whose custody he was placed in that he did violently struggle with and occasion actual bodily harm to three Privates in whose custody he had been lawfully placed*”. He was fined one pound.

In April 1942 he was wounded in action and listed as a Prisoner of War.

Ernest died of malaria on 21 June 1945 just a few months before the end of the war.



A studio portrait of Private Ernest McGeary -1941.

Flying Officer Alan Martin Montgomery, 430040

Alan was a civil engineering draftsman at the CRB. He was born in Sunshine in 1920 and joined the RAAF in December 1942 at the age of 22. He passed his flying training in July 1943 and attained the rank of Flying Officer. He was sent to Canada to undertake further training and he disembarked from Halifax to the UK in February 1944. He was killed in a flying accident in England in July 1944.



Flying Officer Alan Montgomery and his gravestone.

In the early hours of the morning on 24 July 1944, Mitchell FV986 took off from RAF Station Bichester on an operational, cross-country training flight. The aircraft crashed at Chilwell about 3 miles south west of Nottingham at 0230 hours. The aircraft disintegrated on hitting the ground and all the crew members were killed.

The crew members of FV986 were:

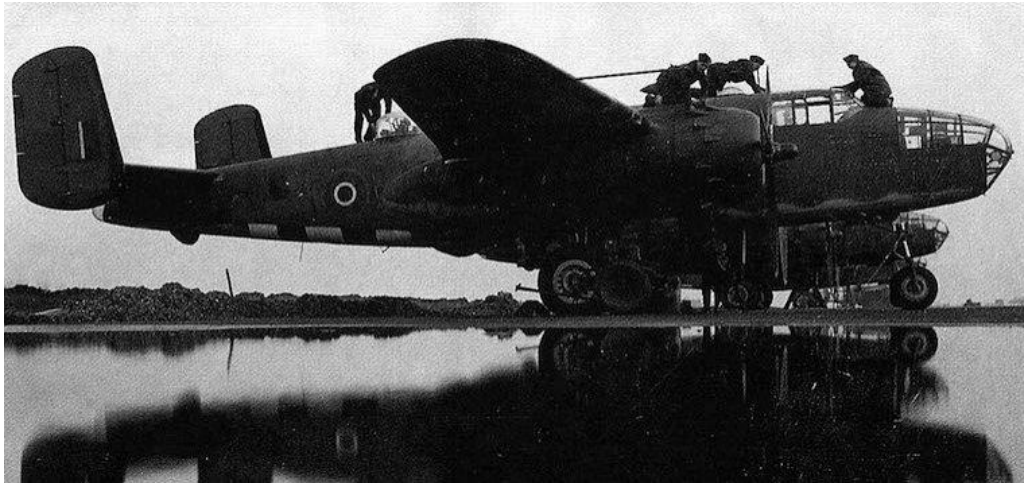
Warrant Officer Allan Alfred Cook (414907) (Wireless Operator Air)

Sergeant Norman Angus Hartrick (R/224413) (RCAF) (Air Gunner)

Flying Officer Alan Martin Montgomery (430040) (Pilot)

Flying Officer Ronald Frederick Stephens (423264) (Observer)

Due to the damage caused and resulting explosion, no exact cause for the crash was determined although it was likely due to a major structural failure.



The RAF B25 Mitchell.

Alan is buried at the Oxford (Botley) Cemetery, Oxfordshire, UK.

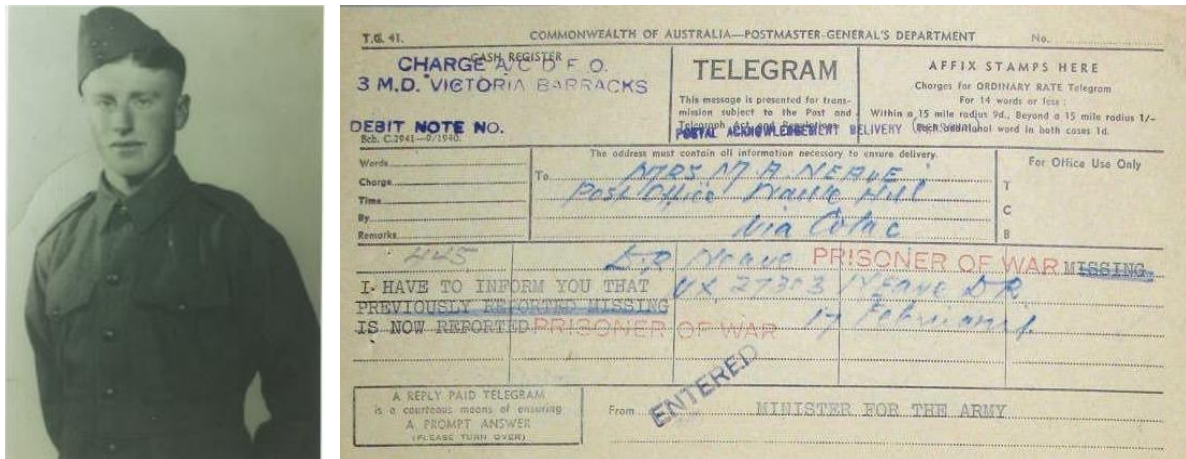
Private Donald Roy Neave, VX 27303

Donald was born in my old home town, Colac, on 12 March 1920. He was 20 years old when he enlisted in June 1940. He described himself as a labourer in his Attestation Form..



Donald Neave's enlistment photograph – 1941.

His file is very short. He spent six months training in Shepparton, Seymour and Bonegilla before being sent to Darwin where he received a couple of fines for absence without leave and drunkenness. He left Darwin on 17 December 1941 for Ambon and went missing on 2 February 1942. On 1 June 1942 his file is stamped PRISONER OF WAR. The last entry in his file is dated 15 September 1945 saying 'Died of Illness whilst P.O.W. 20.7.45' and someone has written next to it 'Dysentery'. He is buried at the Ambon War Cemetery in Indonesia.



Donald Neave and the telegram informing his mother that he was a prisoner of war.



Ambon War Cemetery where Donald is buried.

Donald's older brother Leslie served in the 2nd/8th Australian Field Company in Greece and Crete. He also became a prisoner of war but died of sustained wounds in August 1941.



Leslie Stuart David Neave – died in Salonika in August 1941.

At the time of Leslie's death, Donald's 2nd/21st Battalion – commonly known as Gull Force - was in Darwin, preparing for the assault on Ambon which took place in December 1941. Their fate was doomed from the start. They were sent on a hopeless mission that was militarily unsound – a truly scandalous dereliction of duty of Australian Command. Communications with the Dutch were difficult and transport, air and artillery support, reserves and rations were limited – some think deliberately, so that they wouldn't fall into the hands of the enemy. Gull Force was overwhelmingly outnumbered by the Japanese – and yet they still proceeded with this hopeless campaign. The Dutch surrendered on the first day with hardly any resistance and the Australians could no longer hold back the Japanese. Many were killed and those remaining, including Donald, were imprisoned.

The story of Ambon and Gull Force is a sad one and it is still debated today. The Japanese massacred 300 Australian and Dutch prisoners at the island's airstrip. It is considered one of the most monstrous acts of cruelty perpetrated by the Japanese during the war and gave Ambon a reputation for the bloodiest of war crimes. Conditions were notoriously harsh and there was very limited, if any, medical support. After the war there was an official enquiry regarding allegations made by some prisoners against some senior Australian officers in the POW camp. It is not

appropriate – or possible – to go into these matters in this narrative, but suffice to say, it is a dark chapter in Australia’s military history.

Donald died just two months before the Japanese surrender.



Survivors of Gull Force and the 2nd/21st Battalion, AIF, liberated from Japanese prisoner of war camps and evacuated from Ambon, are brought to Morotai by RAN corvettes for hospitalisation at the Australian Prisoner of War Reception Group Camp, September 1945.

Private Eric Vincent O’Keefe, VX 56471

Eric Vincent O’Keefe enlisted in May 1941 at the age of 20. Although born in Swan Hill, he lived with his mother in Brighton. He was posted to 2nd/2nd Pioneer Battalion and, in January 1942, he embarked in the SS *Orcades* to Batavia (Jakarta).

He was reported missing in Java in April 1942 and in November 1943 he was declared a prisoner of war, ‘interned in a Thai camp’. In April 1945 it was reported that he died of illness (Dysentery and Beri Beri (sic) on or after 1 February 1944. Many prisoners of war of the Japanese suffered from beriberi because of their inadequate diet.

Beriberi is a disease caused by a deficiency of thiamine (vitamin B1) that affects many systems of the body including the muscles, heart, nerves and digestive system. Beriberi literally means 'I can't, I can't' in Singhalese which reflects the crippling effect it has on its victims. The diet of the prisoners consisted to a great extent of polished rice where the husk, which contains thiamine, has been removed. This resulted in a deficiency which led to the contraction of beriberi.

There are different forms of beriberi classified according to the body systems most affected. Dry beriberi involves the nervous system and wet beriberi affects the heart and circulation. Both types usually occur in the same patient but with one set of symptoms predominating. A less common wet beriberi is known as '*shoshin*'. This condition involves a rapid appearance of symptoms and acute heart failure. It is highly fatal and is known to arise in persons whose diet consists of white rice.

Beriberi could be treated by reversing the deficiency in diet but this could not be easily achieved in the POW Camps. The disease is fatal if not treated and the longer the deficiency exists the sicker the person becomes.

Eric is buried in Kanchanaburi War Cemetery in Thailand.



Private Eric O'Keefe and Kanchanaburi War cemetery where he is buried.

Major Roy Leslie Rough EM, VX 117208

Roy was born in Collinwood in 1910 but lived in East Kew. He married Eula Elizabeth Muriel Chiplin in 1935. In his Attestation Form, he described himself as a public servant. He served in the AIF Security Service, Australian Army Intelligence Corps.



Roy Rough – from the CRB staff photograph 1930.

Roy served in the militia with the 24th/39th Battalion from 1926 until he enlisted in 1940. He was taken on strength with the Intelligence Southern Command in June 1940. He underwent training in Seymour and in November 1940 he transferred to G Branch (Intelligence Section). He was promoted to Captain in April 1941 and a year later to Major. He volunteered and was accepted for service in the AIF in December 1942.

His file contains a complicated statement of officialdom, although I came across it in other archives. It states:

“Is seconded in his unit of the Active Citizen Military Forces or in such other unit of those forces to which he may be transferred, for service with the Australian Imperial Force, with effect from the date specified opposite his name, that he retain his present substantive rank, and temporary rank, if any, in accordance with the terms of his appointment to that latter rank, and regimental seniority, and continue to hold his appointment, and that any

substantive or temporary rank hereafter granted to him in the Active Citizen Military Forces, whilst he remains so seconded shall be deemed substantive or temporary rank, as the case may be, in the Australian Imperial Force.”

His file shows appointments in Brisbane and Townsville and a number of hospital visits – for an infected leg, dermatitis herpetiformis (a skin complaint common in people with celiac disease), and other skin conditions.

Early in August 1945 Roy was sent to Labuan in Brunei and attached to the British Borneo Administration Unit. On 31 August 1945 he was killed by a mine explosion – agonisingly, a few weeks after Japan had surrendered¹. He was 35 years old.

He was awarded the Efficiency Medal. This medal was instituted in 1930 for award to part-time warrant officers, non-commissioned officers and men after twelve years of efficient service on the active list of the Militia or the Territorial army of the United Kingdom, or of the other Auxiliary Military Forces throughout the British Empire. It has been superseded in Australia by the Reserve Force Medal.

Roy is buried at Labuan Cemetery.



Labuan War Cemetery, Borneo, where Roy is buried.

¹ The surrender of the Empire of Japan was announced by Emperor Hirohito on 15 August 1945 and formally signed on 2 September 1945.

Sapper Eric Robert Short, VX 42365

Eric was a Sapper in the Royal Australian Engineers attached to 2/10th Field Company RAE 2/19th Battalion (Infantry). He died on 26 April 1945 aged 32. Like Roy Rough (above) he is also buried at Labuan in Borneo.

He was born in Burnie, Tasmania, in 1912 and married Phyliss Ethel Cooke in 1935. In the 1936 electoral roll, it stated that he lived in Edgevale Road, Kew, and he was described as a labourer. At the time of enlistment, he was working for the CRB in Benalla as a carpenter.



Sapper Eric Short – paybook photo taken on enlistment.

He trained at Mt Martha, Seymour and Bonegilla in Victoria before leaving for Singapore on 18 February 1941. In Malaya, he was admitted to hospital twice – for urethritis (urinary tract infection) and pyrexia (high temperature). Eric was reported missing on 16 February 1942 and was declared a Prisoner of War on 13 April 1943 – meaning that his wife was uncertain of his fate for over 12 months.

He was one of over 2,000 Allied prisoners of war held in the Sandakan camp in north Borneo, having been transferred there from Singapore as a part of B Force. The 1,494 prisoners of war

that made up B Force, were transported from Changi on 7 July 1942 on board the tramp ship *Ubi Maru*, arriving in Sandakan Harbour on 18 July 1942.

He died in Sandakan on 26 April 1945.

Many of the personnel buried in Labuan cemetery, including Indian and Australian troops, were killed during the Japanese invasion of Borneo or the Borneo campaign of 1945. Others were prisoners of war in the region, including a number of those who perished on the infamous Sandakan Death Marches, and many hundreds of Allied POWs (mostly British and Australian) who died during their imprisonment by the Japanese at Batu Lintang camp near Kuching were also reburied here.

Pilot Officer Robert Neil Tucker, 438666

Robert was born in Armadale, Melbourne, in 1922. He was a clerk. He married Norma Lesley Rayment in October 1944 and lived in Mont Albert. They had been married barely three months before Robert was killed.



Robert Neil Tucker's enlistment photograph.

Pilot Officer Tucker (navigator) and Pilot Officer F.J. White (pilot) were killed in an aircraft accident when their Mosquito A52-29 crashed during air to ground gunnery exercises near Williamtown, NSW, on 31 January 1945. The cause of the crash was stated as ‘Structural failure of port mainplane’ – which is the left-hand wing. A report of the crash stated:

“RAAF Mosquito A52-29 (Mark FB.40) broke up in flight after the failure of the mainplane on 31 January 1945 at Saltash Range near Williamtown Airfield in New South Wales. This structural failure was witnessed by many people. This aircraft was delivered to the RAAF in January 1945. The aircraft was engaged in an air to ground gunnery training exercise at the time of the accident. It had been in the air for 20 minutes during which time three passes had been made at the target. While attempting the fourth pass at the target the starboard mainplane disintegrated at about 200 feet in a 20 degree shallow dive. The de-lamination occurred at the point that where firing of the guns would have commenced and pull out of the dive would commence. The aircraft did not pull out of the 280 mph dive and crashed on to a property owned by the Hunter River District Water Board near the northern boundary fence of the Air to Ground Gunnery Range.”

The CRB was informed of Robert’s death and Rolf Jansen, Secretary, corresponded with the Department of Air in order to obtain a death certificate for superannuation purposes. There are no details about his enlistment in his file. Most of it is devoted to arrangements for the return of his effects to his wife. Robert is buried in the Newcastle (Sandgate) Cemetery.



The propeller from A52-29.

Flight Sergeant John James Joseph Turner, 410017

John joined the RAAF just shy of his 21st birthday in June 1941. He described himself as a clerk (at the Country Roads Board, Exhibition Buildings). He was born in North Carlton in 1921 and was living in Northcote. He was a bright student having attended Christian Brothers College and St Kevin's. In his Leaving Certificate year he successfully completed English and British History (both with honours), Latin, French, Maths 1, Maths 2 and Maths 3 and by the time he enlisted he had four subjects to complete the course for the Association of Accountants of Australia. He was tall when compared to most of the others – six feet – and played in Ivanhoe's 1st eleven in sub-district cricket as well as football, golf, water polo and tennis.



John's enlistment photo and another taken in Halifax in May 1943. On the reverse it said
"Enjoying the sunshine outside the barracks."

He attended training schools as a navigator at Temora, Bradfield Park (both NSW) and Ascot Vale (Victoria) and in August 1942 he embarked for Canada where he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). There he was awarded his Air Observer's Badge and by April 1943 he was in Halifax, Yorkshire, where RAF 15 Squadron was based. During John's service, this squadron was engaged in the battles of Berlin, Ruhr, Biscay Ports, France and Germany and Fortress Europe.

He was killed in action - described as a flying battle - on 8 June 1944 although the circumstances of his death was a mystery. The file states:

“In crew of Lancaster Mk-111 LM-534 which took off from Mildenhall at 0049 hours on 8.6.44 to carry out an attack on Massy. Nothing was heard of aircraft after leaving 15 Squadron, RAF Mildenhall, Suffolk, England.

*In crew were Flt Sgt J.J.J. Turner
 Flt Sgt J.E. Armstrong
 Flt Sgt C.J. Watson buried Bonnelle, Seine et Oise
 and 3 RAF, 1 RCAF*

*IRRC (presumably International Red Cross – Ed.) advise Lilley, Hales both RAF and 1 unknown dead.
NOK (next of kin) notified of burial by letter 27.6.46.”*

This is the only entry in his file regarding his death – and it was written well after the end of the war. There is no letter on the file informing John’s parents. I presume that the three officers named (Turner, Armstrong and Watson) were RAAF. There is a handwritten note that said that it was checked against the International War Graves Commission list – dated 27/10/49. There is an indecipherable handwritten note at the bottom which, I think, relates to amended burial particulars and it is dated 1951.

However the mystery has been solved. On The Royal Air Force Command’s website, there is an entry for John and the circumstances of his death. It said that they took off from Mildenhall to bomb rail facilities in support of the Normanby Landings. The plane crashed at Nonnelles (Yvelines) and exploded on impact, killing all crew members. They were all named and it said that funerals were held some 19 km ESE of Rambouillet. It also noted that they are now buried at Viroflay New Communal Cemetery, Ile-de-France, France.



Viroflay New Communal Cemetery where John and his fellow crew members are buried.

Flying Officer William Douglas Willis, 400166

William was a clerk when he joined the Board's staff in May, 1935. He became a pilot in the Royal No. 452 (Spitfire) Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force.



Flying Officer William Willis.

William was born in Canterbury in 1917 and he enlisted in June 1940. He was posted to Narrromine, NSW, where he became a pupil flying Tiger Moths.



Tiger Moth trainers of No. 5 Elementary Flying Training School at Narrromine.

He was then sent to Canada to join No. 1 Service Flying Training School at Camp Borden. On the way to Canada he called in to New Zealand where, according to his service record, he was involved in a car accident near Hamilton. At Camp Borden he progressed to North American Yale and Harvard² training between November 1940 and February 1941. On completion of this course, he was promoted to Flying Officer.

He went back to Canada and was attached to the Royal Canadian Air Force for a short time before proceeding to England. He joined No 452 Squadron in early May 1941. He became a Pilot Officer in February 1941 and a Flying Officer the following August. No. 452 Squadron was based in Lincoln and William's life as a Spitfire pilot was to last only four and a half months. It seems so tragically short but it has to be remembered that the average life of a Spitfire pilot was only four weeks.

² These are American aircraft. The Yale is a fixed undercarriage, lower powered, lighter weight version of the well-known Harvard. Both the Yale and Harvard evolved from the North American Aviation NA-16 which was first flown in 1935.

The formality and bureaucracy of the record keeping of the armed forces described the following event. Most of it is handwritten but there are also typed copies of some correspondence. The most telling piece of correspondence said in part:

Dear Sir

The information available in this Department is that Pilot Officer Willis was the pilot of a Spitfire aircraft which, with other aircraft of the same formation, was attacked by enemy fighters over Bethune, France. Four enemy aircraft were destroyed, but Pilot Officer Willis did not return to his base.

A report subsequently received by this Department through the Air Ministry, London, from the International Red Cross Society at Geneva, states that Sergeant Willis is now believed to have lost his life.'

It went on to say that the usual practice in such circumstances was to declare that he was "missing but believed to have lost his life" and said, should confirmation of his death be received, a certificate will be issued to that effect.

There was another very concise note about the incident by the Squadron Leader. He recorded the ME109s destroyed (one by Pilot Officer Truscott of Melbourne Football Club fame) but four Spitfires were missing, one of which was Willis. Willis had been flying missions for four and a half months.

A letter dated 18 September 1947 finalised the circumstances of his death. It stated:

"Whilst sweeping in the area of CONTRE-MOULINS it was learnt that a British Fighter said to be a Spitfire had crashed there in flames on the afternoon of 18/9/41. The body was taken away by the Germans to FECAMP.

No trace of this casualty could be found in FECAMP Cemetery but the records of St. MARIE-LE HAVRE state DIV. 67 Row D Grave12. 20.9.41 "WILLY AVLATEUR venant de FECAMP".

G.R.U. holds a burial card for the occupant of this grave on which are written the above quoted service particulars "P.O. W.D. Willis AUS/400166" and they are registering the grave in that name".

On 21 January 1942, a letter was sent to the Accountant, Country Roads Board, advising that this officer was reported missing and believed to be killed.



William Willis' original grave in France.

Willis was 24 years old when he died. He is buried at Ste. Marie Cemetery in Le Havre in France.



Ste. Marie Cemetery in Le Havre, William's last resting place.

There is a quirk of fate in this story. When I was researching William Willis's story I came across the photograph below. William Willis is the seventh airman from the right – at the back. The amazing thing is that the airman standing in the back row, fifth from the right, is Flying Officer Donald Lewis - the son of Keith Bannantyne Lewis who worked for the CRB before entering the First World War. Keith's story is described in Chapter 2.



Group portrait of pilots of No. 452 (Spitfire) Squadron RAAF at RAF Station Kirton-in-Lindsey.

Tragically, Donald Lewis died ten days shy of his 20th birthday. The Squadron diary described the circumstances of his death as follows:

Squadron proceeded to Manston to stand by to operate with 602 Squadron on QO. Operation – protection of minesweepers. During the course of this operation, P/O Lewis called up on the RT, saying – “I’m going into the sea”. He gave his position as 270. Sgt Harper noticed oil on P/O Lewis’s windscreen. A search was carried out on the course given, and P/O Lewis was seen lying on his back in the water with his parachute alongside. F/Lt. Smith is of the opinion that P/O Lewis was unconscious. F/Lt. Smith ordered his section to stand by while he

climbed to 3000 ft to give fixes on "Channel C" and report on Channel C. Unfortunately the rest of his section mistook his instructions and followed him up. After transmitting long and slow messages. They came down to 100ft again but could find no trace of P/O Lewis. Haze was thick up to 1000ft. After orbiting for 40 minutes, the section returned.

This has turned out to be a doubly tragic story.