

## THE EIGHT JEWS OF LARK FORCE: TRAGEDY AND SALVATION

### THE JAPANESE INVASION OF RABAU, 1942

*Peter M. Allen*

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article tells the epic and powerful stories of the eight Jewish soldiers of Lark Force: David Bloomfield, Keith Levy, David Selby and Issy Weingott who escaped New Britain after the Japanese invasion of Rabaul in January 1942, while Harry Bernstein, Albert Fernandez, Leslie Pearlman and Herbert Silverman MID did not escape. It seeks to bring to light this forgotten saga, illustrating the terrible suffering and demise, as well as fortitude, of the Australian soldiers who confronted the brutal Japanese forces during World War Two. As exemplified by the experience of these eight men on New Britain, their adversaries included not only the Japanese and their cruelty, but also hunger, exhaustion, disease, volcanoes, tropical jungles, crocodiles, head-hunters and dangerous seas. Of the 1,485 Australians in Lark Force defending Rabaul, tragically 1,093 men did not return. By July 1942, most were victims of either shocking murders or ultimately, the catastrophic sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*.

**KEYWORDS:** Military History, Second World War, New Britain, Lark Force, Tol massacre, *Montevideo Maru*

There have been several articles and some books written by or about Jewish Australian servicemen who returned to Australia, such as the personal accounts by David Bloomfield<sup>1</sup> and David Selby<sup>2</sup> or the anthologies by Gerald Pynt<sup>3</sup> and Mark Dapin.<sup>4</sup> However, the detailed exploits of our more than 340 men who died on service have rarely been documented.<sup>5</sup> The writer is researching their stories and aims for

this paper to be the first in a series that focuses on the extraordinary events involving particular groups of Jewish Australian servicemen who have made the supreme sacrifice.

For example, in World War One (1914–18) there were some 39 Jewish diggers who died over the eight months of the Dardanelles Campaign in 1915, then ten killed in action in just 24 hours of the battle of Fromelles in July 1916.<sup>6</sup> However, in World War Two (1939–45) there were fewer situations in which multiple deaths of Jewish servicemen occurred, reflecting the very different nature of the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Approximately half of all Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) aircrew flew with Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons in Europe – most in Bomber Command – as shown by 27 of their names inscribed on the new Australian Jewish War Memorial in Canberra.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, at the very start of the war in the Pacific the situation arose when the lives of eight Jewish men in the Australian Army fatefully crossed: Harry Bernstein, David Bloomfield, Albert Fernandez, Keith Levy, Leslie Pearlman, David Selby, Herbert Silverman and Issy Weingott. During 1941, less than one year after leaving their relatively quiet civilian lives, they landed with Lark Force at Rabaul, New Britain. Few people appreciate that it was the first Australian territory to be attacked by the Japanese – in January 1942 – more than a month before their attack on Darwin, and most Australians do not know Lark Force's horrific story. Equally, the ages of those eight men – a cross-section of the Army at the time – challenge the myth of the fresh, 'young Aussie digger': six of them were between 30 and 43, one was 20 and the youngest was only 18 years old. Indeed, only three attested their true age at enlistment, but most had family with military experience.

After Lark Force's fraught retreat from Rabaul in January 1942, four of them continued their audacious journeys to miraculously escape New Britain by the following April. However by July, the other four Jewish soldiers had died in terrible circumstances, including Private Leslie Pearlman. In the previous *AJHS Journal*, Erica Cervini graphically describes Pearlman's murder by the Japanese and his mother's anguish.<sup>9</sup> This paper sets out to complete the intersecting, remarkable and confronting stories of the eight Jews of Lark Force and their families.

### **Jews from diverse backgrounds answer the calls to arms**

As each of their following pen sketches demonstrate, these Jewish soldiers came from a variety of upbringings and social strata. The oldest of

the eight men was Albert Fernandez, born in Sydney on 4 August 1898 to Matilda (*née* Isaacs) and Ralph Fernandez, a 'dealer' and some-time burglar. After their elder son, Nathan was born in 1896, Ralph continued to have a few brushes with the law, and the family often moved between Manly, Surry Hills and Seven Hills.<sup>10</sup> In 1915 Nathan enlisted in the 1st Australian Imperial Force (1st AIF),<sup>11</sup> by which time Ralph had gone to South Africa and divorced Matilda.<sup>12</sup> After enduring a fire at her Manly residence, 1917 brought more distress when Matilda was fined for assaulting another woman and Nathan was killed in action at Passchendaele, Belgium.<sup>13</sup> Albert unsuccessfully tried to enlist in the AIF and then he and Matilda dealt in second-hand clothing.<sup>14</sup> In 1928 Albert was involved in a fight while defending an accusation that Matilda had mobilised local housewives to protest against the noise emanating from George Colvin's neighbouring factory at night.<sup>15</sup> The *Sydney Truth's* report, headlined: 'BANG! Scene of Stoush in "The Village" MANLY MEN', was quite amusing in its characteristic scurrilous style:

'There were only two blows, and each was a knock-down,' Colvin told the magistrate, Mr. McMahon. 'That ought to appeal to the audience at the [Sydney] Stadium,' remarked Mr. McMahon, and Colvin agreed that 'it was good punching.' Fernandez declared: 'It was Colvin who swung the first blow. I wasn't expecting it just at the moment, so stopped it with my right eye.' Mr. McMahon gave a decision worthy of Solomon: 'The merits of the affair are suggested by the result. I think it was about even as far as punishment went, although Fernandez might have got a little the worse of it. But I think justice will be best served by dismissing both cases?'<sup>16</sup>

Matilda died in November 1939, two months after war against Germany was again declared, and in April 1940 Albert enlisted in the Australian Military Forces (AMF), aged 41. He claimed that he was a full ten years younger – lying like many men who wanted to meet the 18 to 40 year-old criteria.<sup>17</sup> NX19620 Private Albert Fernandez commenced training as a medical orderly at the Sydney Showgrounds and was transferred to 2/10th Field Ambulance at Liverpool in September.



*Private Albert Fernandez of 2/10th Field Ambulance, enlisted April 1940, aged 41.  
(Manly Local Studies Image Library)*

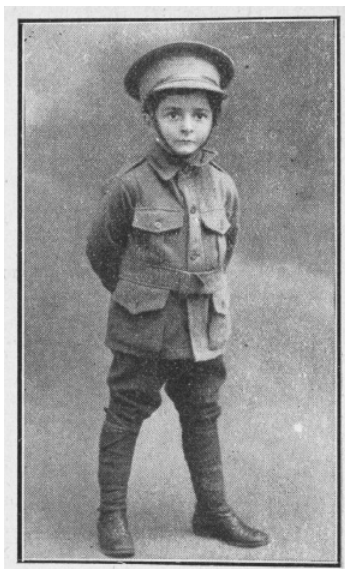
Harry Bernstein was born in London, England, on 20 August 1899 to Sarah (*née* Michaelson) and Abraham Bernstein of Whitechapel. Harry worked as a clerk and served briefly in a British pioneer battalion then sailed to Western Australia in 1921.<sup>18</sup> He later moved to Victoria and lived in St Kilda, Melbourne, working as a tailor's machinist. Like Fernandez, he was still single in June 1940 when he also enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC) claiming to be 40, one year younger than his actual age, as VX28109 Private Harry Bernstein.<sup>19</sup>

David Mayer Selby came from a very different social strata. Born on 13 March 1906 in Melbourne, he was the eldest of Aimee (*née* de Beer) and Herbert Selby's four sons and daughter.<sup>20</sup> The family moved to Sydney, where David was educated at Sydney Church of England Grammar School and – rather than entering his father's scientific instruments business – chose to study Arts and Law at the University of Sydney. There, he joined its part-time militia unit and transferred to the 1st Artillery Brigade. He was admitted to the New South Wales Bar in 1931, and married Barbara Phillips in March 1939. Their first daughter

was born in 1940, but David, now aged 34, still volunteered for active service and enlisted as NX142851 Lieutenant David Mayer Selby.<sup>21</sup>

Leslie Pearlman was born in Ballarat, Victoria, on 10 September 1908, the fourth of nine children to Rose (*née* Jacobs) and Baron Pearlman, a peddler and some-time goldminer. They were members of the Ballarat Synagogue, where Baron's father was *shammas*, Rose's sister Celia married Samuel Phillips in 1909 and Leslie was bar mitzvah in 1921. Samuel was one of some twenty Jewish men born in Ballarat who served in the 1st AIF.<sup>22</sup> Sadly he died in Egypt of nephritis in 1916 aged 27, without firing a shot in anger. Leslie won two scholarships to the Ballarat School of Mines and his youngest brother, Lloyd, recalled: 'He really was a wonderful cricketer [and] sportsman. He always had a job ... even in the Depression. He opened up a printing shop for the Kleinsteins in Ararat ... and was the first in the family to buy a car.'<sup>23</sup> Leslie remained there after Baron died in 1930, working as a draper, while Rose moved to St Kilda. In March 1939 Leslie joined the local militia, but with the outbreak of war he also moved to Melbourne, then enlisted in the 2nd AIF in June 1940 aged 31, as VX30758 Private Leslie Pearlman.<sup>24</sup>

Issachar Weingott was born on 23 April 1910 to Harris Weingott and his second wife, Leah (*née* Caroline Welch) in Annandale, Sydney, not far from the family's waterproof-clothing factory.<sup>25</sup> Three sons of Harris and his first wife, Sarah (*née* Knopp – divorced 1903), enlisted in the 1st AIF. Tragically, both Alexander and Samuel died of wounds received at Gallipoli within five weeks in May-June of 1915.<sup>26</sup> *The Hebrew Standard* noted beneath the headline, 'The Toll of War' that: 'The one consolation Mr Weingott will find in his double bereavement is the knowledge that his sons played the part of men in the struggle for righteousness over tyranny ...'<sup>27</sup> After their deaths, in August 1915 *The Sydney Mail* included a disquieting picture of five-year-old Issachar dressed as a miniature digger, with an inaccurate caption.<sup>28</sup> Despite the *Hebrew Standard's* 'consolation', in 1921 Harris Weingott 'accidentally ... drowned' in Sydney Harbour.<sup>29</sup> During his abbreviated service, Samuel Weingott wrote a diary of his army exploits, something that his young half-brother would emulate decades later. By 1940 Issachar had married and moved to Victoria, then in June enlisted at Caulfield as VX19707 Signaller Issy Weingott, understating his age by one year and naming his wife, Anne (*née* Keady), as next of kin.<sup>30</sup>



*Five-year old Issachar Weingott. The photo in The Sydney Mail, Wednesday 25 August 1915, was captioned: 'Issacher Weingott, the six-year-old son of Mr. Weingott, Annandale, Sydney, who recently collected £33 for the Australian Wounded Fund. Two of his brothers have fallen at the Dardanelles' (NLA Trove)*

Herbert Nathan Silverman was born on 4 December 1910 in Fitzroy, Melbourne, to Janet (*née* Lucks) and Harold Silverman, who worked in his wife's family's drapery business. Harold was on the board of management of the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha and his father was Reverend S. Silverman, who was living in Palestine. Herbert was a very bright student and capable speaker.<sup>31</sup> He was awarded First Class Honours in Hebrew at the 1928 Leaving Certificate and completed medical studies at the University of Melbourne in 1936.<sup>32</sup> The following year, Herbert served as a Resident Medical Officer (MO) at Brisbane General Hospital and then became the MO at Julia Creek's new hospital in outback Queensland.<sup>33</sup> By November 1940, Herbert had returned to Melbourne, living in St Kilda with his sister, Myrtle. The following January, whilst a locum at Colac District Hospital, he and three nurses were on their way to an urgent case at Apollo Bay, when their car lost control and overturned near Forrest. One of the nurses died and Herbert escaped with lacerations and concussion.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps that was the catalyst for him to join the AAMC a few weeks later in February 1941. Aged 30, V11358 Lieutenant Herbert Nathan Silverman was posted to 5 Casualty Clearing Station at Balcombe Camp on the Mornington Peninsula.<sup>35</sup>

Lark Force's youngest two Jewish soldiers were born almost 25 years after the eldest two. Keith Joseph Levy was born on 28 September 1921 to Esther (*née* Harris) and Reuben Levy of St Kilda, Melbourne. In August 1914, Reuben was one of the first men to enlist in the AIF,

as No. 121 of the 7th Battalion.<sup>36</sup> He was wounded during the landing at Gallipoli, then served in Britain and France as a Staff Sergeant, using his civilian training as a dental mechanic. In World War Two, Reuben understated his age by two years to enlist for home service.<sup>37</sup> His son, Keith won a scholarship to Brunswick Technical School in 1940 and served part-time in the Port Phillip Fortress Signals while working as a 'motor salesman'.<sup>38</sup> He overstated his age by one year when he enlisted for full-time duty with the unit in January 1941 at Queenscliff, Victoria, and despite actually being only 19 years old, VX125137 Keith Joseph Levy was immediately appointed Acting Sergeant.<sup>39</sup>

David Morris Bloomfield was born on 28 June 1923 to Lily (*née* Abrahams) and Alfred Bloomfield of Glebe, Sydney. The family lived in Point Piper when David was bar mitzvah at The Great Synagogue in 1936, and he became an active member of the Maccabean Tennis Club.<sup>40</sup> He overstated his age by a year, claiming to be already 18, when he enlisted in the artillery and commenced training in April 1941 as N109549 Gunner David Maurice Bloomfield.<sup>41</sup> Training at Georges Heights, overlooking the serene Sydney Harbour, the adolescent soldier could not have imagined what hardships he would experience nor the horrors he would witness just nine months later. By then, this disparate assortment of eight Jewish soldiers, ranging in age from 18 to 43 with all but one being single, and in occupations from lawyer and doctor to the rougher edges of society, would find themselves together with new mates in a harrowing struggle against an even newer enemy.

Privates Leslie Pearlman and Harry Bernstein undertook recruit training at Balcombe Camp, then in July 1940 both went to Puckapunyal, central Victoria, joining the 2/22nd Battalion, raised that month. While Pearlman trained as an infantryman, the much older Bernstein was attached as a stretcher-bearer, and they were joined by Signaller Issy Weingott. As part of the 23rd Brigade of the 8th Division, they were soon training with another Victorian-based battalion, the 2/21st. In September 1940, Japan signed a Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, including a 'New Order in Greater East Asia.' That same month, in a portent of events to come, the two battalions marched the 240 kilometres from Trawool to Bonegilla, near Albury-Wodonga, over ten days. They sang:

It's a long way to Bonegilla, it's a long way to go.  
It's a long way to Bonegilla, to see the Murray flow.  
Goodbye Young and Jackson's, farewell Chloe too ....<sup>42</sup>



Historian Hank Nelson noted: 'So confident were the troops that they were on their way to North Africa that they imposed the language of the AIF in the Middle East on the upper Murray: even the creeks cutting through the white grass became "wadies".'<sup>43</sup> The three sister battalions of the 23rd 'Bird' Brigade soon separated: the 2/21st went to Ambon with Gull Force and the 2/40th joined Sparrow Force on Timor. Lark Force was established to serve in New Britain and New Ireland, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel John Scanlan, a distinguished veteran of the 1st AIF.

On 11 March 1941, Harry Bernstein, Leslie Pearlman, Issy Weingott and the men of the 2/22nd rode a troop train to Sydney, to embark the next day on HMT *Katoomba* for Rabaul, as part of Lark Force. Joining them aboard was a fourth Jewish soldier, Private Albert Fernandez with a detachment of the 2/10th Field Ambulance. By then, Rose Pearlman's anxiety was palpable: of the four of her eight surviving children who had enlisted, three were now on active service.<sup>44</sup> As the men on *Katoomba* sailed north via Port Moresby, they had mixed emotions, as observed by Nelson:

None of the troops who went to Rabaul expected to go there, none were prepared for service in the wet tropics, and nearly all were from southern Australia. The 2/22nd had trained for longer than most battalions before it sailed for overseas, but the training had been for mobile warfare in open country where it would have been just one unit in an Australian division, and a British army. The men had been frustrated by rumours of shifts, and by units more recently formed taking pre-embarkation leave and photographs of crowded wharves and troop ships. When they learnt where they were going, they were uncertain in their reaction. They were glad to be on the move, glad to be going somewhere new, but, they asked, 'were they on their way to war and were they on their way overseas?' – in the way that Libya and Palestine were overseas, and Tasmania was not. Many, AIF and militia, thought Rabaul might be an interlude leading to something better. They knew little about the town, the country around it, or the people who lived there.<sup>45</sup>



Moreover, it seems that the task of withstanding a Japanese attack on that remote tropical island was also beyond the capacity of the Australian authorities.



*The Fortress Signals Troop, Australia, prior to departure for Rabaul, c. 1941. Lance-Sergeant Keith Levy (rear, second from left) and Captain Keith Denny (foreground) were among 24 of the 39 men to return.*

### **Lark Force prepares to defend New Britain**

On 28 March 1941, the 2/22nd Battalion, the 1st Independent Company, six Army nurses, smaller anti-aircraft and ambulance units disembarked from the *Katoomba* at Simpson Harbour, Rabaul. Located at the northern tip of the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain, at that time the isolated town was capital of the Australian-administered Territory of New Guinea, having been captured from the Germans in 1914. Rabaul also happens to be in the caldera of one of the Territory's most active and dangerous volcanoes. The troops soon settled in with the relaxed lives of the expatriate and native populations. Leslie wrote home fortnightly: 'We play a lot of cricket here! I am just the same as ever, get a wicket now and again. There are also boxing matches, but I am a better looker than a boxer.' He also sent photos, several of which include Tavurvur: 'The volcano is still very loud at present, it makes Rabaul just about

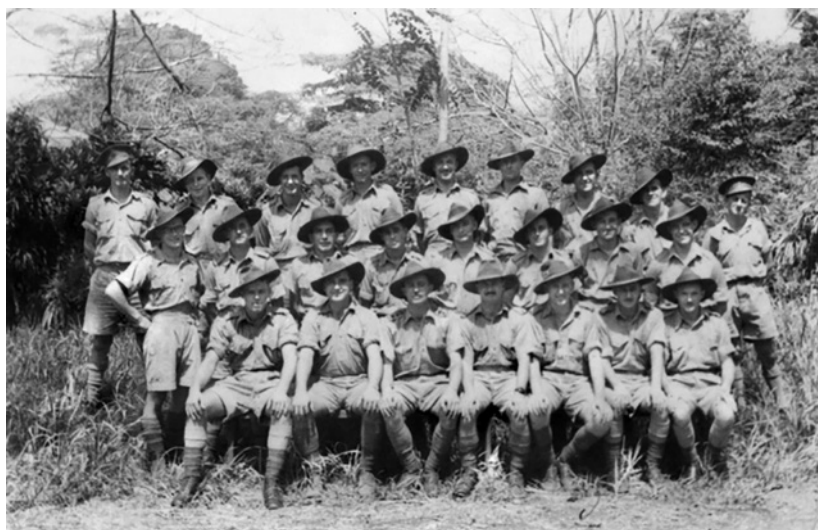
unbearable to go into on leave. The dirt and pumice is terrible.' In May, Leslie and his fellow soldiers climbed to the rim of the volcano's crater, and he wrote how: 'You can see the steam coming out. The only trouble will be when the steam stops.'<sup>46</sup> Shortly afterwards, on 6 June 1941, they watched Tavurvur erupt; but it was not an extraordinary event.

Meanwhile, having transferred to the artillery, and now Captain Herbert Silverman, the Regimental Medical Officer (RMO) of 'L' Heavy Battery embarked from Sydney on HMTS *Zealandia* in early April. Also on board was Lance-Sergeant Keith Joseph 'Bluey' Levy, with the Rabaul Fortress Signals. The day after Anzac Day 1941, 26 April, the *Zealandia* sailed into Simpson Harbour with Rabaul's new battery: it boasted just two six-inch coastal guns. They had been taken from Fort Wallace at Stockton, NSW, and were set up at Praed Point, on the southern slopes of South Daughter, overlooking the harbour's entrance and behind Tavurvur. Rabaul and the Lakunai airfield lay on a flat stretch of ground on the northern shores of Simpson Harbour, between the slopes of North Daughter and The Mother. Overlooking the town and south of Simpson Harbour was another volcano, Matupi, barren and weathered, from whose crater a mighty column of black volcanic ash poured during the middle months of 1941. South of the town another active volcano, Vulcan, lay on the western shore of Blanche Bay.

For the Japanese, Rabaul was important because of its proximity to the Caroline Islands, mandated to them by the League of Nations after the First World War and the site of a major Imperial Japanese Navy base on Truk. The capture of New Britain would offer them one of the best natural deep-water harbours in the South Pacific and airfields to provide protection to Truk, and also to attack Allied lines of communication between the United States and Australia.

In August 1941 'L' Anti-Aircraft Battery, consisting of 54 militiamen, arrived in Rabaul where they were to complete their training. It included another two Jews: the Commanding Officer (CO) Lieutenant David Selby and Gunner David Bloomfield. Like 'L' Heavy Battery, as an AMF unit they were also looked down on by some of the 2/22nd Battalion's AIF men as 'Chockos' ('Chocolate Soldiers').<sup>47</sup> Yet, these details would have mattered little as anxiety continued to rise while they learned the Japanese army had invaded Indo-China and was heading south.

In early December 1941, Lark Force was supported by the arrival of 24 Squadron RAAF. Its role was to protect the seaplane base and

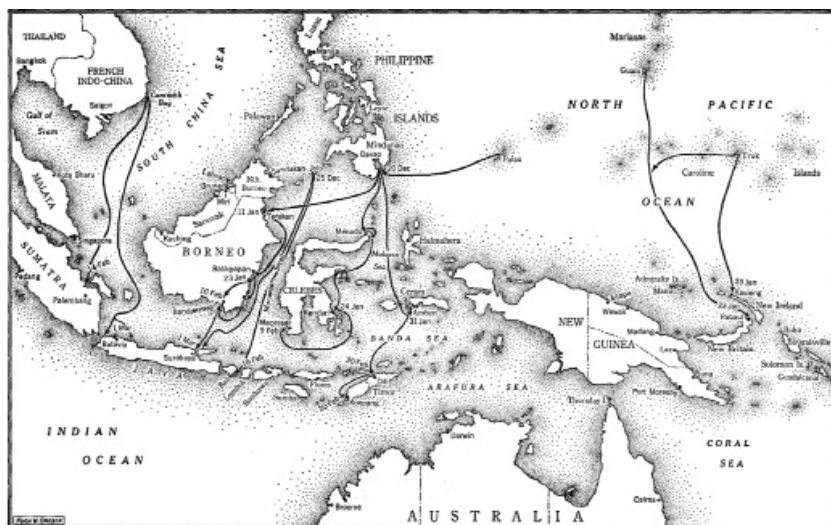


*2/10th Field Ambulance detachment at Rabaul, July 1941. Of the 24 men pictured, Private Albert Fernandez (second row, second from left) was one of 17 who did not return. Privates Wilkie Collins and 'Billie' Cook (back row, second and third from left) both miraculously survived the horrific Tol massacre by the Japanese.*

airfields at Rabaul, as well as provide early warning of Japanese movements through the islands to Australia's north. However, the squadron only had four *Hudson* bombers and ten *Wirraway* fighters, because resources were limited by the demands in Europe, Malaya and elsewhere. By then a total of 1,485 Australian troops made up Lark Force – plus some local New Guinea Volunteer Rifles – to defend that eastern part of the Territory against the Japanese threat of invasion, with more than 1600km of coastline. The reality was that Lark Force was ill-equipped to repel an invasion. It had no sea support, poor air cover and little artillery. The infantry units were lightly armed and possessed few mortars or machine guns. The view of the Australian Chiefs of Staff was that, at best, this force could no more than briefly delay a Japanese advance.

The United States and Australia declared war against Japan after its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on 7–8 December 1941. Guam was captured two days later by the Japanese South Seas Detachment, under Major General Tomitaro Horii, who was then directed to capture Kavieng, New Ireland, and Rabaul, New Britain, as part of 'Operation R.' For a few weeks that December, Harry Bernstein was admitted with

malaria to the 2/10th Army General Hospital on Namanula Ridge. He might have met Albert Fernandez, an orderly, among its staff that included the six Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) Sisters, who were mostly treating soldiers suffering from tropical diseases. Meanwhile, the merchant vessels *Neptuna* and *Macdhui* – with Jewish seamen and brothers, John and Henry Rosen respectively – evacuated most of the expatriate women and children from New Ireland and New Britain. They included German and Japanese sympathisers, some of whom had been supplying information to the Japanese for several years. *Map of the Japanese advance south from December 1941 to January 1942 (not to scale). It also shows the relative position of Rabaul to Port Moresby, where*



*escapees reached, and to Luzon, Philippines, where 1,052 POWs were killed in the sinking of the Montevideo Maru.*<sup>48</sup>

### The Japanese attack Rabaul

Tavurvur continued rumbling through the new year, while the Japanese Mobile Carrier Fleet steamed south. From 4 January 1942, it commenced air raids on Rabaul and consequently Lieutenant Selby's 'L' Anti-Aircraft Battery fired the first shots from Australian territory at an attacking enemy – albeit without the range to reach the bombers' altitude. Selby watched as they flew overhead in arrowhead formation: 'flashing silver in the bright sunlight' and then the earth 'leapt and danced in a huge swirling column' as Lakunai airfield was bombed.<sup>49</sup>

A week later the volcano erupted even more spectacularly, spewing lava into the air accompanied by lightning. Nonetheless, it was still not as furious as in 1937, when Tavurvur and its twin, Vulcan, erupted simultaneously, killing 507 people around Rabaul. This time, although 800, mostly European, women and children had been evacuated from Rabaul since December, they had not left because of the volcanoes: it was the fear of an imminent Japanese invasion.

Aware of their perilous situation after the first Japanese air raids, Selby later wrote:

Again about the middle of January, I went down to headquarters and asked what the plans were should a withdrawal become necessary. Despite my lowly rank, I had been present as a unit commander at various conferences, but this particular matter had never been raised. The reply I received to my question was disconcerting: 'That is a defeatist attitude, Selby!' I was referred to an order of the day which had been promulgated on the first of January. This order which I learned later had come from Australia, exhorted every man to fight to the last, and ended with the words underlined and in capitals: 'THERE SHALL BE NO WITHDRAWAL.'<sup>50</sup>

Selby later reflected, '... isolated and vulnerable as we were, we were later to regret bitterly the absence of a comprehensive plan for a fighting retirement.'<sup>51</sup>

The Japanese bombing of New Britain increased in intensity over the ensuing weeks. Of the eight *Wirraways* sent aloft to challenge the Japanese raiders on 20 January, five were shot down or crashed. Watching from Frisbee Ridge, 'L' Anti-Aircraft Battery's David Bloomfield wrote: 'It was like hawks attacking sparrows. We had never seen aircraft with such speed.'<sup>52</sup> Also helping to keep the enemy aircraft at a high level was 'L' Heavy Battery, although unsuited to the task. During that time its RMO, Captain Silverman, was himself a patient in the Rabaul Hospital, where perhaps he too met Albert Fernandez. Then on 21 January, frustrated at the lack of planning to evacuate casualties, Silverman apparently discharged himself from the hospital in his pyjamas, determined to return to his unit.<sup>53</sup>

Just before 8:00am the next day, a further attack was launched by

45 Japanese fighters and dive bombers on 'C' Company of the 2/22nd at Vunakanau. The dive bombers then turned to Praed Point, silencing 'L' Heavy Battery's guns, so they never were able to engage enemy shipping, as was their original purpose. Under a heavy pall of smoke and dust, dazed survivors said that the upper gun had been blasted out of the ground, crashing onto the lower gun, killing eleven men and injuring many including the CO, so Silverman would have dealt with numerous casualties at his Regimental Aid Post (RAP).<sup>54</sup> The 24 Squadron was virtually destroyed, and its three remaining aircraft were withdrawn. With no use for the airstrips, both were demolished; but only the RAAF had an evacuation plan. With the loss of the coastal battery, the departure of the air force and the cratering of the airfields, Scanlan decided that the justification for the prime role of Lark Force no longer existed. He ordered demolitions be carried out and the township evacuated. At 3:30pm he received news from Selby's position that an enemy convoy was approaching. At 4:00pm preparations were further disrupted by the 'rather botched demolition' of the airfield bomb depot. It levelled everything within a quarter mile, killed several civilians and shattered the valves of wireless sets in Rabaul, putting the headquarters radio transmitter out of action. The only remaining means of passing messages was by a tele-radio at Toma, 30km south. Thus, as Rabaul received confirmation of the arrival of the enemy convoy, its main link with the outside world snapped and it would be days before the high command in Australia had any clear idea what happened there.

Scanlan then made the controversial decision to inform his men they were going on a field exercise for the next two days. Perhaps he thought this would put the men on alert without destroying their morale, but it also meant that the men took only a light load of rations and other supplies with them. This would prove disastrous during the subsequent retreat into the interior. Selby was ordered to destroy his anti-aircraft guns, but prevaricated, relocating them as Lark Force withdrew from Rabaul to wait on the western shores of Blanche Bay for the inevitable enemy assault. The men who had been attached from 'L' Heavy Battery were relocated nearby, so Silverman established an RAP in the area of Vulcan. By 5:00pm all were settled in their new positions and watching civilians making their way south in trucks, cars and on foot along the road to Kokopo, beneath a cloud of black smoke from the burning wharves and the demolitions in Rabaul township.



Private Albert Fernandez was one of several orderlies involved in the hasty relocation of the hospital patients and supplies later that night, which Sister Lorna Johnston, one of the Army nurses, described:

We'd been on duty about 28 hours by the time John May our padre came up to see us. There were a lot of casualties and we were very busy. John told us that somebody had sent a signal to the military in Australia that said: 'We who are about to die, salute you.' Apparently, this huge Japanese convoy had been sighted just off the coast of New Britain. We evacuated about 9 o'clock that night out to the Mission Station at Kokopo ... We had 80 patients and took them in two or three ambulances and some private cars. We were the last to actually leave Rabaul and the troops had already blown up quite a few roads, so we had to go around the back way. We finally arrived at Kokopo about 2 o'clock in the morning. And straight away we set to work digging slit trenches.<sup>55</sup>

At midnight on 22 January, the Japanese South Seas Force approached Rabaul: a massive fleet including twelve destroyers, eight cruisers, nine submarines, two aircraft carriers with 171 fighter and bomber aircraft and nine troop transports – totalling more than 50 ships. The transports launched landing barges, each holding between 50 and 100 men, at six points around Simpson Harbour, some 5,000 enemy troops.

It was daylight on 23 January before the trenches at Kokopo were completed, and the nurses looked down at the harbour. 'We couldn't believe our eyes,' remarked Sister Johnston at the size of the Japanese force: 'Our troops had no chance, there was nothing they could do. There were only 1400 of them.'<sup>56</sup> By 8:00am the main body of the invasion force was mopping-up and Rabaul township was occupied. An hour later Lark Force headquarters received reports that the Japanese were coming 'in their thousands' and could not be held. At about 11:00am, the flustered CO Scanlan gave the panicked order: 'Every man for himself.' No further defence was feasible, and the Australian forces withdrew and broke into small parties. At the same time, a Japanese float plane dropped leaflets, with General Horii's proclamation:



To the Officers and Soldiers of this Island!

SURRENDER AT ONCE!

And we will guarantee your life, treating you as war prisoners. Those who RESIST US WILL BE KILLED ONE AND ALL. Consider seriously, you can find neither food nor way of escape in this island and you will only die of hunger unless you surrender.

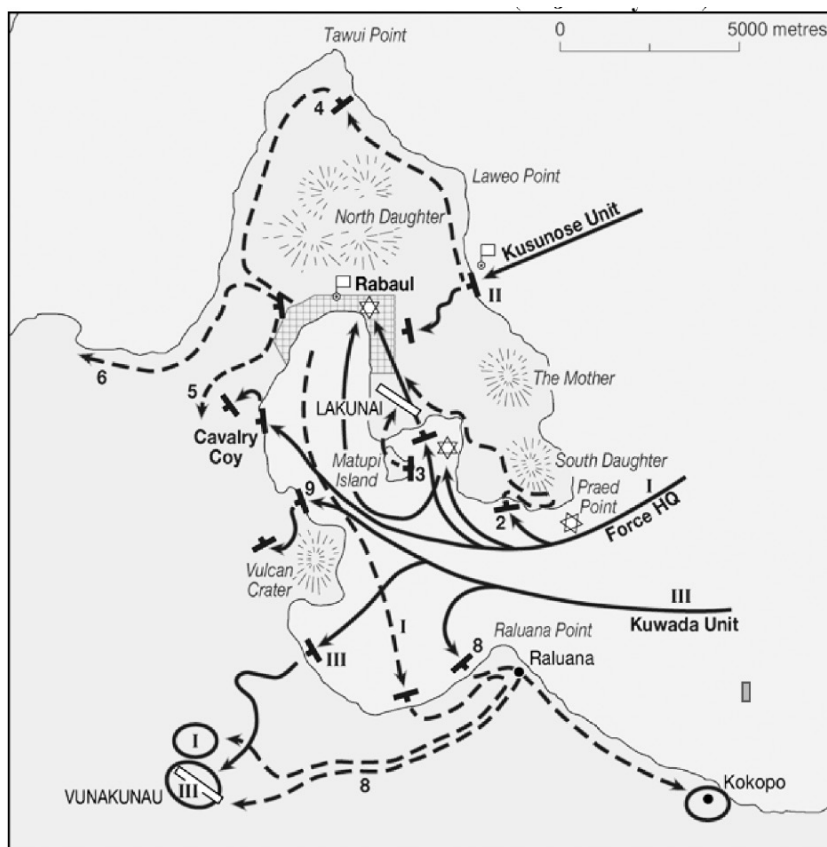
January 23rd, 1942.

Japanese Commander-in-Chief.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile at Kokopo, the nurses found that their two Medical Officers and most of the orderlies had gone: 'They just left us, all excepting two orderlies who volunteered to stay behind and help.' Fernandez must have been one of them because, as Sister Johnson explained: 'All of the orderlies [who left] were [later] massacred at Tol Plantation. The men were wearing Red Cross armbands, but their captors ignored these.'<sup>58</sup> The hospital staff met the Japanese on the beach to surrender, and so Private Albert Fernandez was one of the first Lark Force soldiers to be captured.

From Three Ways, Selby watched the Japanese approach 'like a swarm of black ants' and his men fought hard until the threat from the right flank forced them back.<sup>59</sup> At midday, the Japanese fleet moved up the harbour in line and an hour later the invasion of Rabaul was complete: the enemy forces had grown to some 17,000 men. Under fire from the ships, the Australians began to pull back through the bush. Unprepared for retreat, chaos ensued, and Lark Force disintegrated, splitting into small parties that withdrew in two main lines across the Gazelle Peninsula: west to the north coast, and south-east toward the south coast. During that day's fighting, two officers and 26 men were killed, while the Japanese lost 16 killed.

The next day the Japanese, thinking they had silenced all of the Australian batteries, performed a victory fly-past. Lieutenant Selby's anti-aircraft gunners opened fire, shooting down a Japanese bomber, but having given away their position, they destroyed their guns and headed for the jungle too. At the same time, Signaller Issy Weingott set off with a group of mates in the same direction: 'As we were walking down the road the Jap planes machine-gunned and bombed the road,' he wrote in his diary, 'so we thought it time to take to the jungle. We cut our way through jungle and finished up in a deep gully.'<sup>60</sup> Each group sought its own way to escape, but only some would achieve salvation.



*Diagram of the Japanese South Seas Force invasion of Rabaul, New Britain, on 23 January 1942, involving more than 50 ships and 20,000 personnel. (The six-pointed stars represent the advancing, Japanese Force HQ).<sup>61</sup>*

### **Escape from Rabaul – but not all escape from the Japanese**

Two days prior to the invasion, on the afternoon of 21 January, L/Sgt Keith Levy's Fortress Signals section had evacuated the wireless station at Malaguna on the instruction of his CO Captain Denny, and the next day made their way south past Toma. About midnight they abandoned their vehicles at the Warangoi River, and then used a native outrigger for three hours to relay across it. The party arrived at Putput Plantation for a rest when dawn was breaking on 23 January, but – when a Japanese seaplane dived to investigate – as Levy later explained:

Capt. Denny ordered us to get away from the plantation as quickly as possible. We crossed the neck of Putput

Bay in a canoe and a ketch. Capt. Denny's instructions were that we were to keep going along the track by the coast in a southerly direction. No particular destination was mentioned to me. When we were about three miles from the plantation, we heard explosions and I was subsequently informed that the plantation had been bombed.<sup>62</sup>

After another 25 kilometre hike, Levy's party arrived at Sum Sum around 6:00pm and met a lot of RAAF officers, who were waiting to be evacuated by seaplanes. One officer advised Levy that his party could not get away on them until all the air force personnel had been removed. Less than an hour later he was aboard one of two Short Sunderland seaplanes with the injured and weakest soldiers, taking only the clothes they wore. Overloaded by some 900kg each, the Sunderlands failed to get airborne on their first attempts and had to dump fuel before they could stagger aloft and fly the four-and-half hours to Samarai, an island off the south-eastern tip of New Guinea. A second group took a schooner south to Tol Plantation and were rescued from Wide Bay by another RAAF Sunderland on 24 January. It was the last flight out of New Britain, totalling some 150 evacuees – but that was not the last time Tol would be heard of.

On landing at midnight, the overloaded seaplane punctured one of its floats, necessitating four of the personnel to sit on the opposite wing to keep the damaged float clear of the water for three hours, until they managed to get ashore. The CO of 11 Squadron that arranged the rescues from its base at Samarai was Squadron-Leader Julius Allan 'Dick' Cohen – later renamed Sir Richard Kingsland – one of the most famous Jewish aviators of World War Two. Following repairs, the same Sunderland took Levy and his men to Townsville on 26 January. A few weeks later, L/Sgt Keith Levy provided a comprehensive witness statement to an army court of enquiry.<sup>63</sup> While it was focused on determining details of the Japanese invasion of Rabaul, the enquiry also established that the soldiers had not been guilty of desertion.<sup>64</sup>

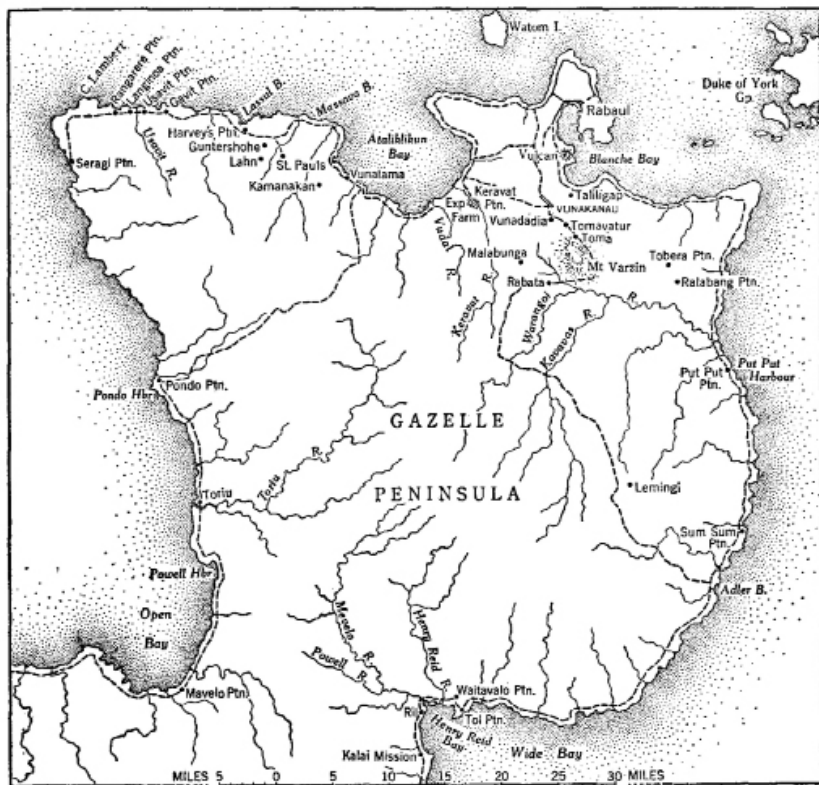
Returning to the rapidly deteriorating situation on the Gazelle Peninsula, where the other six Jewish soldiers were among over a thousand Lark Force men still eluding the Japanese in assorted groups with hundreds of civilians: Captain Silverman and Major Akeroyd, the 2/22nd MO, were in a party heading westward. As the Japanese occupied

Four Ways, cutting off the road to Tobera, the party skirted it and moved on through the dense jungle, avoiding the roads and eventually reaching the Keravat River, near the north coast. However, following a skirmish there on 26 January, infantry Lieutenant Lennox Henry and Captain Silverman were delayed while treating some wounded troops, and were captured by the Japanese. The officers refused to identify another Australian soldier involved in the skirmish. The Japanese then beheaded Henry on the spot and took Silverman to Rabaul because he said he was a doctor. Back at Rabaul, on 30 January Silverman had unfortunately not been wearing his Red Cross brassard (armband) and the Japanese would not recognise his status as a doctor. They therefore considered him an escaping soldier and summarily executed him.<sup>65</sup> Captain Herbert Silverman, aged 31 and one of at least five Lark Force officers murdered by General Horii's troops, was posthumously Mentioned in Despatches.<sup>66</sup>

In the meantime, the other five Jews – Selby, Bloomfield, Weingott, Bernstein and Pearlman (now a Lance-Corporal) – were among the majority of Lark Force fleeing to the south coast. When Selby's party arrived at the Warangoi River, they were able to stock up on ammunition and food from the trucks abandoned there.<sup>67</sup> Then further south, at his temporary headquarters in Toma, Scanlan refused to meet Selby, who was told by the CO's Signaller 'Bill' Harry: 'When the beach defence broke down it was one glorious *shemozzle*.'<sup>68</sup> The men then had to climb the rugged Baining mountains and traverse mosquito-riddled rain-forest, enduring heat, unrelenting tropical rain and electrical storms. 'Distances were measured on a time basis, as the nature of its terrain is such that linear distances have little meaning: to go forward one mile requires travelling four or five miles nearly vertically up and down.'<sup>69</sup> Also, the men were untrained in navigating the jungle, where even in the daytime visibility could end at arm's length, and they were starving: some subsisted on a biscuit a day each, while some did not have any food for four or five days, being unfamiliar with the native plants. All the while, Japanese seaplanes and naval vessels patrolled the coastline and hinterland, looking for people fleeing Rabaul and seeking to cut off their escape routes. Many were also driven by rumours that the RAAF would return to Wide Bay and rescue them too.

Captain Richard Travers voluntarily surrendered near Toma on 27 January with approximately 100 men of his 'D' Company and was

immediately murdered by the Japanese. His death was apparently intended as a warning to other Australians contemplating evasion. Harry Bernstein – presumably caring for sick and wounded soldiers – was among those who surrendered to the Japanese at Toma that day and taken back to a Prisoner of War (POW) camp in Rabaul, where Albert Fernandez was already being held with civilian internees. However, the six Army nurses were allowed to stay at Kokopo's German-led mission, on the request of its Lutheran pastor.



*Map of the Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain. (Note scale at bottom of '5 to 0 to 30 Miles'.) More than 1,200 men of Lark Force and civilians fled Rabaul to the north and south coasts. The extremely rugged terrain could require trekking four or five times the horizontal scale distance. By July 1942, less than 400 had escaped on small vessels, most from Jacquinot Bay, a similar distance again south of Rabaul as Wide Bay – a total trek of 500 to 600km.<sup>70</sup>*

As they headed to the Catholic mission at Lemingi on 26 January, the pace of the group with Selby and Bloomfield slowed when they were

joined by 'Y' Company, and so Weingott's party overtook them. On 1 February, Weingott's party reached the coast, then shot a pig and dynamited a river for fish.<sup>71</sup> They were just a day or two behind Pearlman's group, which was approaching Tol further south, while all were trying to avoid not only the Japanese enemy, but also – even more frightening – the *Mok Kol Kols*, a nomadic tribe of murderous natives, who were rumoured to be head-hunters. On 3 February, Bloomfield saw five Japanese landing craft moving south along the coast from Rabaul and recalled: 'The only thing that was intact was my underpants. My shorts were torn, my shirt collar had come off, rotted. My boots were soft from being wet all the time. My socks were sodden.'<sup>72</sup> David Selby's granddaughter described their wretched situation in a recent article:

The men became increasingly ill – Selby, like many of the others, caught malaria but, fortunately, at a stage when there were still some quinine tablets left. They were injured and debilitated, their boots cut to shreds and their hope fading. One of Selby's lowest moments was when he sought comfort in the photograph of his wife and baby and discovered that the jungle rivers had washed away the image.<sup>73</sup>

Having trekked some 300km in ten days – scarcely echoing the 2/22nd recruits' benign, country stroll from Trawool to Bonegilla 16 months earlier – Leslie Pearlman's group eventually arrived at Tol Plantation on 2 February. The following morning, soon after Leslie spoke to some fellow soldiers at the plantation – possibly Privates Brannelly and Waugh – five Japanese craft landed troops of the 144th Infantry Regiment there, trapping those Australians who needed canoes or boats to cross two rivers to escape. A party of 22 Australians congregated around a white flag on the beach. They all belonged to the Army Medical Corps and were wearing Red Cross brassards, which the Japanese soldiers immediately removed; but these prisoners were spared and taken back to Kokopo. Over the rest of the day, the Japanese rounded up more than 180 soldiers and civilians who were hiding out in the surrounding jungle, including Leslie – many too weak or sick to care, let alone run. Meanwhile, Brannelly and Waugh escaped with some other Australians and disappeared in a different direction. The Japanese forced their captives to surrender their remaining belongings such as identity tags, letters and paybooks. They then fed them a hot,

'good meal of rice and Australian bully beef.'<sup>74</sup> This reinforced some prisoners' idea that perhaps they would be better off in Japanese hands – but actually the Japanese were preparing them to die anonymously.

The Japanese soldiers took groups of up to twelve men, tied together, into the plantation and asked them to choose whether they wished to be shot or bayoneted. Erica Cervini's paper includes details of their subsequent murders and the gruesome description provided by Private 'Billie' Cook of 2/10th Field Ambulance.<sup>75</sup> The Japanese brutally executed 115 Australian soldiers and 43 civilians in four separate massacres at Tol and Waitavalo Plantations on that horrible day, 4 February 1942. After being left for dead where they fell, Cook, miraculously still alive despite a bayonet through his throat, managed to untie his hands and make his way to the beach. At dusk he saw the smoke from a camp-fire and staggered towards it. The next morning, he found a small party under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Scanlan. Although he lost his voice as a result, Cook survived the Tol massacre, along with five other men – but Private Leslie Pearlman, aged 33, did not.

The next day, Selby's party cautiously approached Tol. Bloomfield was walking on a track close to the plantation and, despite accidentally brushing the shoulder of a Japanese officer, luckily managed to escape his trailing patrol by detouring further up the Bulus River.<sup>76</sup> Two days later on 6 February, Bloomfield came across one of the massacre locations in a coconut plantation and found another survivor amongst the executed soldiers, Private Maxwell 'Smacker' Hazelgrove. Selby asked Bloomfield to get Smacker to Kaline Mission for medical treatment to prevent his wounds becoming septic. When they finally arrived at the mission, its Father Meyhoeffer said: 'No. Keep going ...' but Selby appealed: 'Look, we've got two wounded men here from a Jap massacre.' Meyhoeffer pleaded: 'The Japs have been here and have threatened to kill me if I help the Australian soldiers,' to which Selby replied: 'If you don't help us, I'll kill you.' Smacker received treatment and the party continued southwards.<sup>77</sup>

Along the way, they learnt that two wounded men, found by the Japanese in the homestead of nearby Waitavalo Plantation, had been smeared in pig grease and burned alive. Meanwhile, Issy Weingott's party rescued another survivor of the Tol massacre, whose hands were tied behind his back for two days before he found someone to undo them, and so his wrists were all festered. One of the six survivors of



the horrific massacres died of his wounds within a month, but four subsequently were able to testify against their slaughterers, which also helped to stoke the resolve of the Australian forces in New Guinea.

Over the following days, Selby's party met more groups of Australians heading south, including Scanlan's party. On learning of the Tol massacres and reading a note from the Japanese stating that he was responsible for what happened, Scanlan said he was going to give himself up, hoping that would placate them. 'His speech,' wrote Selby later, 'through its sheer hard logic, depressed me more than anything which had happened on the track.'<sup>78</sup> Scanlan began the long walk back to Rabaul on 10 February and with his party of four handed themselves in at a *Kempeitai* (Japanese Military Police) outpost near the Warangoi River on 21 February, joining the growing number of Lark Force POWs. During those eleven days, the so-called unassailable 'fortress,' Singapore, also fell to the Japanese. Over 130,000 allied servicemen passed into captivity, including more than 15,000 Australians of the 8th Division, many of whom died as a result. So, even if Lark Force's 2/22nd and the other 'Bird' battalions of 23rd Brigade had not been split from the division, they would still have succumbed to the Japanese onslaught.

In *Jewish Anzacs*, Mark Dapin provides vivid accounts by Selby and Weingott of their daring struggles through the New Britain jungle, as the remnants of Lark Force continued their fraught retreat. Weingott's party made a raft to cross a river, but 'All the time we were crossing it we were thinking of crocodiles as the river was supposed to be alive with them.'<sup>79</sup> In the following extract, Selby elaborated how – of necessity – their trekking was mostly done in darkness:

At night time the brightest stars and even a full moon were completely blotted out, and no matter how near one walked to the man ahead, it was impossible to see even the dim outline of his figure. ... That night, as the leaders stumbled over obstructions in the path, the word would be passed down the column in a tired, dead voice, 'Roots,' 'Vine,' 'Log,' 'Slippery patch.' Our bones and muscles ached till we felt that we could scarcely stand; when we stopped for a rest, we grew so stiff, we felt that we could never move on, our bodies, clammy with sweat, growing cold in the night air. Our boots felt

like masses of lead and our packs seemed to weigh tons.  
My steel helmet bowed my head down. Still we kept on,  
stumbling, slipping and falling.<sup>80</sup>

Some of their other accounts illustrate the range of attitudes that the Australian soldiers faced. After the native villagers of Drina had murdered the plantation manager, raped his wife and were apparently planning to ambush the Australians, Selby executed the ringleader of the revolt. Later, at Palmalmal Plantation, his party was given food and refuge by Father Ted Harris, a Sacred Heart missionary.<sup>81</sup> Weingott described how their feet were cut by coral and he was saved from drowning by a native. Over the next two months, dozens of men began congregating at camps around Jacquinot Bay, located twice the distance south of Rabaul as Tol was, on the north shore of Wide Bay. They had trekked a total of 500 to 600km from Rabaul. Many of the fugitives were delirious, most were suffering, and some died from malaria, dysentery, tropical ulcers, starvation and exposure. With crucial assistance from men of the Coastwatchers group, the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit organised rescue missions, and the first escapees reached Port Moresby on 27 February after getting away in a small craft. Following another five weeks of subsistence and elusion, on 9 April Selby, Bloomfield and Weingott were among 156 desperate Australian soldiers and civilians that crammed into the administrator of Papua's diesel yacht, now HMAS *Laurabada*. Under cover of a storm early the next morning, it sailed for Port Moresby, 700 nautical miles south and west across the open seas and arrived there three days later. Most of the men were immediately transhipped to Australia on the MV *Macdhui*, whose new Chief Saloon Waiter was Henry Rosen. He was still grieving for his elder brother, Chief Steward Jack Rosen, who had been killed just seven weeks earlier when the MV *Neptuna* was sunk in the Japanese bombing of Darwin.<sup>82</sup> Alas, when the *Macdhui* returned to Port Moresby two months later it was also attacked and sunk by the Japanese, killing ten crewmembers, including Henry Rosen, who was manning one of its guns.<sup>83</sup> Jack and Henry Rosen are one of five pairs of Jewish Australian brothers that died on service in World War Two.<sup>84</sup>

Eventually, by July 1942, more than 300 members of Lark Force had managed to return to Australia in various vessels. Meanwhile, those soldiers who disregarded General Horii's decree and were captured after fighting rather than immediately surrendering, were simply



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*The diminutive HMAS Laurabada arriving at Port Moresby, New Guinea, on 12 April 1942, after three days navigating the 700 nautical miles from Jacquinot Bay, New Britain. David Selby, David Bloomfield and Issy Weingott were among the 156 Australians that it evacuated from the pre-arranged rendezvous at Palmalmal.*

murdered in the same fashion as Captain Herbert Silverman, one of 43 men who died or were killed attempting to escape from New Britain. Nonetheless, most members of Lark Force were taken into captivity over this period, joining the likes of Privates Fernandez and Bernstein. During an air raid on Port Moresby the Japanese had dropped a bundle of hand-written messages from some of Rabaul's prisoners of war. They were allowed only a few words, so most letters were pitifully short: 'Dearest this is just a line to let you know that I am a prisoner of war in the Japanese [censored] at Rabaul. I am well and uninjured and am very well treated. Love to my little one.'<sup>85</sup> It was enough to give families, friends and comrades hope that the 1,200 Australian men and women still on New Britain were safe. Ominously, nothing more would be heard of their fate until after the war.

## The POWs sail from Rabaul

The military POWs and civilian internees alike endured five months of imprisonment under primitive conditions, labouring for food to stay alive and being subjected to brutalities and indignities. They also came under regular bombardment by the RAAF while at forced labour in the Blanche Bay area. By the end of May the Japanese army had handed the POW camp over to its navy, in preparation for their invasion of mainland New Guinea and the transfer of the prisoners to Asia.

At about 4:30am on 22 June 1942, Japanese marines and guards roused the main group of male soldiers and civilians and organised them into parties of 50. This first transfer was planned to the Japanese-occupied island of Hainan, off the coast of China. Some 60 Australian officers and a dozen or so civilian women were retained in the camp. Half-starved and ill, Albert Fernandez, Harry Bernstein and hundreds of other men marched from the compound at 9:00am, 'with a smile and a cheery farewell for those remaining; the stronger supporting the weaker, arm in arm as they boarded the ship.'<sup>86</sup> Historians estimate that 853 POWs and 200 civilian internees left that day on the *MV Montevideo Maru*. After operating as a troopship in the Japanese islands, it had returned to Java before sailing for New Britain. However, when it departed Rabaul, *Montevideo Maru* was not marked as a POW transport and sailed north-west for Hainan unescorted, keeping to the east of the Philippines in an effort to avoid Allied submarines.

After completing three patrols in early 1942, the submarine *USS Sturgeon* was refitted at Fremantle, Western Australia, and returned on 5 June to patrol the South China Sea north of the Philippines. The *Sturgeon* sighted *Montevideo Maru* off the island of Luzon on 30 June. Believing it to be an enemy troopship, Lieutenant Commander Wright pursued it, but was unable to fire as the target was travelling too fast. However, *Montevideo Maru* slowed towards midnight and for approximately four hours the submarine manoeuvred into a position to fire its four stern torpedoes. The *Sturgeon's* log of 1 July 1942 records an impact at 2:29am, approximately 100 feet (30 metres) aft of the funnel. Minutes later, Jack Atkinson was one of several submariners invited to inspect the damage through its periscope:

'Captain let us come up and see this one that we hit. I had a look ... and we thought it was a troop ship ... We saw people jumping over the sides,' he recalled around

70 years later at age 93, fighting back tears. 'I'm so sorry that it happened. But we didn't know about it. So I can't say anything else. It was just a terrible thing.'<sup>87</sup>

Survivors from the *Montevideo Maru's* Japanese crew reported two torpedoes striking the vessel followed by an explosion in the oil tank in the aft hold and that she sank by the stern in as little as eleven minutes. Although ordered to abandon ship, it seems the crew made no attempt to assist their captives, resulting in the deaths of all prisoners and internees on board. The ship's lifeboats were launched but all capsized or were too damaged. It is believed that 1,140 (including 88 Japanese crew) were killed. While 18 crew survived, including the captain, and made it to the Philippines, most of them were killed by local guerrillas. Private Albert Fernandez, aged 43, and Private Harry Bernstein, 42, died in this catastrophic mistake: the worst maritime disaster in Australian history and also the greatest single loss of Australian lives in peace or war.

Yosiaki Yamaji was the sole remaining survivor from the *Montevideo Maru's* crew when he gave the only eyewitness account, in 2003. Even after 61 years, he recalled hearing the death cries of trapped Australians going down with the ship and graphically described the dreadful spectacle:

We went back to the place where the ship sank to pick up Japanese crew members. There were more POWs in the water than crew members. The POWs were holding pieces of wood and using bigger pieces as rafts. They were in groups of 20 to 30 people, probably 100 people in all. Some were singing, and some had their heads down, silent. I was particularly impressed when they began singing 'Auld Lang Syne' as a tribute to their dead colleagues. Watching that, I learnt that Australians have big hearts.<sup>88</sup>

In July 1942, the second group of Australians, including Scanlan and about 60 officers plus 18 women, were shipped to Japan. The Japanese launched the Kokoda, Buna, and other key campaigns from Rabaul, including the massive naval air battles of Midway and the Coral Sea. Up to 300,000 Japanese were garrisoned there between 1942 and 1945, while up to 300 bombers and fighters operated from its five airfields.

From August 1942, General Horii led his troops over Papua's Owen

Stanley range to within sight of Port Moresby. In October the 2/1st Battalion, led by outstanding Jewish soldier Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Cullen, was one of the Australian Army units that faced remnants of the infamous 144th Regiment at Eora Creek, from where they fought the Japanese back along the Kokoda Trail towards Buna. In an ironic reflection of Lark Force's escape from Rabaul, in early November Horii and two other Japanese soldiers desperately set out along the coast for Giruwa paddling a canoe, but it capsized. 'I have no strength to swim any further,' the commander told his surviving companion, 'Tell the troops that Horii died here.'<sup>89</sup>

### **From hope to anxiety – then to closure and eventually, to recognition**

As 1942 unfolded – amid Australia's worst year of the war – Rose Pearlman kept anxious watch over her letterbox at 121 Argyle Street, St Kilda. She corresponded with two sons: Lloyd, who was still in Australia with the army, and Cyril, who had been awarded a Military Medal serving with 2/16th Battalion in the battle of Bardia, Libya, in January 1941. Her daughter, Celia's letters arrived regularly from Palestine, where she was a nursing Sister serving in the AANS. Still there was nothing from Leslie. The Tol massacre was mentioned in the newspapers in April, but from then on, government censorship all but eliminated news of atrocities, and he was now listed along with hundreds of other soldiers as 'Missing Abroad.' In September 1942 the army reported to Rose that at a plantation on 3 February, witnesses had spoken to Leslie, who was 'quite well' and so could be a surviving POW.<sup>90</sup> Thus encouraged, Rose continued writing to him and asking after him from anyone in uniform, not unlike the anxious families of the other thousand missing Lark Force men.<sup>91</sup>

After twelve months of unbearable waiting since Captain Silverman was officially posted missing, Myrtle Goldberg learned in April 1943 that her brother Herbert was: 'Now reported believed deceased (date unknown).' Eventually, in March 1944, Sir William Webb completed his first report on 'Atrocities or breaches of the rules of warfare by the Japanese armed forces in the Pacific';<sup>92</sup> but no information regarding the lost men of Lark Force was released. The families of the three Jewish soldiers who were still missing continued to hope and pray for their safe return.

It took a year after the Guadalcanal campaign on the Solomon Islands, further south, before the American forces eventually landed on

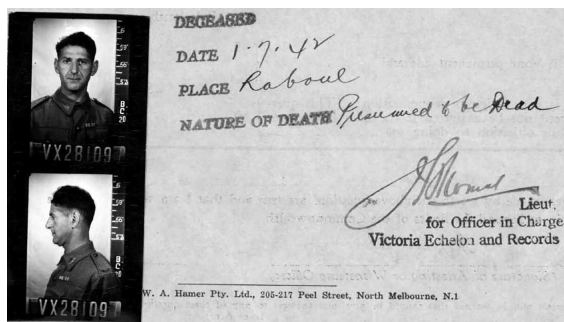
New Britain in December 1943. Australians returned to relieve them another year later and had effectively confined the Japanese around Rabaul by the beginning of 1945. The following April, Lloyd Pearlman served with the RAAF for a couple of weeks at Jacquinot Bay. That was the same location from which the *Laurabada* had picked up Lark Force escapees some three years prior, and not far from where his brother, Leslie's bleached remains still lay with other victims of the Tol massacre, unbeknown beneath the rapid jungle regrowth until discovered later that same month. At their surrender in August 1945, some 69,000 Japanese troops were still in Rabaul, and it took another two years to repatriate them all. Coincidentally, the writer's father, Sergeant Philip Allen, served there for the first nine months of that process.<sup>93</sup>

When General MacArthur's troops were on their victory march into Tokyo, the six Army nurses were found by accident. They returned to Australia with most of the second group of Lark Force POWs transported to Japan, having survived more than three years of deprivations, heat, cold and cruelty. Shortly afterwards, the death of the men on the *Montevideo Maru* was revealed to the public, and a controlled release of fragments from the Webb report included reference to the Tol massacre and 'Billie' Cook's evidence – but not all of the names of the victims. So, if Leslie had survived the Japanese invasion of Rabaul and the massacres, then been taken a POW – as the Pearlmans believed – he may have ultimately perished on the voyage to Asia.

Two months after war's end and after three and a half years of hearing nothing regarding the missing POWs of Lark Force, most of their next of kin, including Private Albert Fernandez's uncle Albert Isaacs in Brisbane and Private Harry Bernstein's mother Sarah in London, were finally advised of their fate, while their service records were stamped: 'For official purposes presumed dead on 1 July 1942 (on *Montevideo Maru*)'. The following December 1945, Captain Herbert Silverman's sister was finally advised, and his service recorded that: 'For official purposes presumed dead. Location and date not stated.'

After one to six months convalescence, all four Jewish soldiers who had escaped New Britain re-joined the fight on mainland Papua New Guinea. Interestingly, while later serving in the Jacquinot Bay area of New Britain for the five months to mid-April 1945, Keith Levy attended a Passover seder there, commemorating another, much earlier exodus to salvation.<sup>94</sup> They survived to be among the hundreds of thousands of servicemen and women who flooded home to Australia as 1945 rolled





*Extract of the service record of Private Harry Bernstein, stretcher-bearer with 2/22nd Battalion. Captured on 27 January 1942 at Toma, New Britain, he spent the next five months as a POW in Rabaul, before embarking on the ill-fated MV Montevideo*

into 1946, that also included David Selby's four siblings and Rose Pearlman's other three children – but the fate of Lark Force's eighth Jewish soldier still remained unconfirmed. It was not until May 1946 that Rose finally received the telegram that she had dreaded for over four years:

'Leslie became missing and for official purposes presumed dead on 4 February 1942', but there were no other details.<sup>95</sup> Mercifully, when Rose died in 1956, she was still unaware that Leslie had been brutally murdered at the Tol Plantation.

The Japanese unit responsible for the Tol massacres was the 3rd Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment, commanded by Colonel Masao Kusunose. After the war, he was tracked through Japan to the foot of Mount Fujiyama, where he was found in December 1946, having starved himself to death from a peculiar sense of honour, rather than face a War Crimes Trial. Kusunose had written in his diary: 'Heaven will preserve Japan and the Emperor.'<sup>96</sup>

In 1947, five years after his death, Captain Herbert Silverman was posthumously Mentioned in Despatches for: 'Services rendered whilst POW in Japanese hands.'<sup>97</sup> However, the specific details of his actions were not publicly known until 18 years later, when the *Australian Jewish News* published a letter on 29 January 1960:

#### TRIBUTE TO JEW

As a member of the 2/22 Battalion AIF I attended a service at the Shrine [of Remembrance, Melbourne] last Sunday.

Dr John Akeroyd, who was the Battalion Medical Officer, gave the address and eulogized the bravery of Dr Silverman, a Medical Officer stationed at Rabaul

with the Australian Forces. Dr Silverman was himself a patient at the Rabaul Hospital at the time of the Japanese attack.

Leaving his sick bed, said Dr Akeroyd, this brave Jewish Medical Officer undertook duties far beyond what could be expected from any Officer under the circumstances, and showed devotion and heroism in the care of our sick and wounded until he was captured by the Japanese.

Refusing to identify another Australian Soldier involved in a skirmish with the Japanese, which would have meant the death of that soldier, Dr Silverman maintained that attitude although under pressure and knowing full well he himself was facing the death penalty. Dr Silverman was executed.

Giving this as one example of Jewry's contribution to Australia, Dr Akeroyd stated that he was proud to have been associated with Dr Silverman and bluntly deplored recent attacks of anti-Semitism.

It is right and proper that we should give equal prominence to the actions of our non-Jewish friends as well as reporting the vile attacks made on us.

Yours faithfully,

Charles Lewis<sup>98</sup>

The names of Captain Herbert Nathan Silverman MID (1910–42), Lance-Corporal Leslie Pearlman (1908–42), Private Harry Bernstein (1899–1942) and Private Albert Fernandez (1898–1942) are engraved on the Rabaul Memorial in Bita Paka War Cemetery, Rabaul, New Britain, that commemorates more than 1,230 members of the Australian Army and RAAF who lost their lives in the area or the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* and have no known grave. Bernstein's and Fernandez's names are also on the Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial at Ballarat, Victoria, dedicated in 2004. It had taken some 60 years for researchers to confirm that 1,093 of Lark Force's 1,485 men did not return to Australia. Regrettably, it has taken 80 years to confirm that neither did four of its eight Jewish soldiers return alive: their names also inscribed on the Australian Jewish War Memorial, Canberra, dedicated in 2018.<sup>99</sup>

## Postscript

It is apt to note that, with Jews comprising approximately 0.5 percent of the Australian population, their actual number in Lark Force corresponded with the statistical likelihood of between seven and eight Jewish men. Conversely, given his detailed record of interrogation by the Army, it is odd that Keith Levy (1921–83) was the only one of the four Jewish survivors of Lark Force who did not provide a personal account after the war. Issy Weingott (1910–1971) wrote an unpublished diary of his experience. David Selby (1906–2002) rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Citizen Military Forces<sup>100</sup> and in 1956, wrote a book, *Hell and High Fever*. He reflected on the experience of evading the Japanese:

One thing which we never treated flippantly was a conviction among everyone that we had been preserved by Divine Guidance. There was scarcely a man in the party who had not been saved several times from death by what seemed nothing short of a miracle. Often, when I found myself sinking into the depths of depression, I would remind myself of the remarkable escapes I had had ... A cynical voice would whisper that those who had already died or were now dying had probably thought the same at some time, but it was a voice to which I refused to listen.<sup>101</sup>

It seems that Rose Pearlman also displayed a similar sense of hope, but just as Divine Providence did not favour her son Leslie, 47 of the 53 men of David Selby's Rabaul 'L' Anti-Aircraft Battery did not see their homeland again.<sup>102</sup> In 2001, another one of its six men who did return, David Bloomfield (1923–2008) published *Rabaul Diary: escaping captivity in 1942* and was interviewed in 2004 by the Australians at War Film Archive.<sup>103</sup>

The Japanese attack on Rabaul of 23 January 1942 is regarded as their only entirely successful operation in the South Pacific and was arguably the beginning of our country's bleakest year of the war. 'The battle for Australia has commenced,' the Acting Prime Minister, Frank Forde, broadcast to the nation the day after the invasion. So horrific was the Tol massacre that the Australian government suppressed details for 46 years, until 1988. Perhaps that is because the fall of Rabaul is generally considered Australia's worst defeat of World War Two, arguably due

to the ineptitude of the authorities and Lieutenant-Colonel Scanlan. Hank Nelson also points out that:

On Gallipoli, in Singapore or on Ambon, the Australians fought on foreign lands and as junior partners: the major decisions about the civil population and military planning and tactics were often controlled by others. On the Gazelle the Australians were the only troops, they controlled the civil administration, and they fought on land they had administered since 1914. But they had no home ground advantage.<sup>104</sup>

Moreover, Margaret Reeson quotes ‘an Australian officer who escaped from Rabaul as saying “the abandonment of the European males and the Chinese population was scandalous”,’ and she argues that ‘The little Dunkirk of the islands was the triumph of independent initiative’ rather than due to action by authorities in Australia.<sup>105</sup>

There have been national commemorations for the fall of Singapore and the bombing of Darwin. Yet the fall of Rabaul – which occurred one month earlier and resulted in more than four times the number of victims as Darwin – has been marked only by a few quiet ceremonies, noted Nelson. He argues that part of the reason seems to be that there were relatively few survivors, and many of them remained so traumatised by what happened that they could hardly talk about it. Also, only four of the hundreds of European civilians who remained in Rabaul were alive at the end of the war. Consequently, most Australians know nothing about the first Japanese attack on Australian territory, the terrible murders, the tragedy of the *Montevideo Maru* or this critical time in our history.<sup>106</sup>

After decades of lobbying by relatives and others of the Rabaul and Montevideo Maru Society, in 2009 a plaque was unveiled at Subic Bay, Philippines, to honour the men lost in the sinking; in 2010 the Australian Government officially recognised the history and sacrifice resulting from the fall of Rabaul; and in 2012, Governor-General The Hon. Dame Quentin Bryce unveiled the Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* Memorial in the grounds of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

No less incredible and shocking than, if not echoing, many awful stories of the *Shoah*, after 80 years’ silence this dreadful saga of eight Australian Jews on the opposite side of the world must also be heard. It exemplifies the courage and suffering of all of Lark Force’s soldiers and

families, who were caught in the extreme brutality and inhumanity of the paradoxically named ‘Pacific War.’<sup>107</sup>

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