

# Collett, Trevor

## David (1913–1942)

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### MILTON HOOK

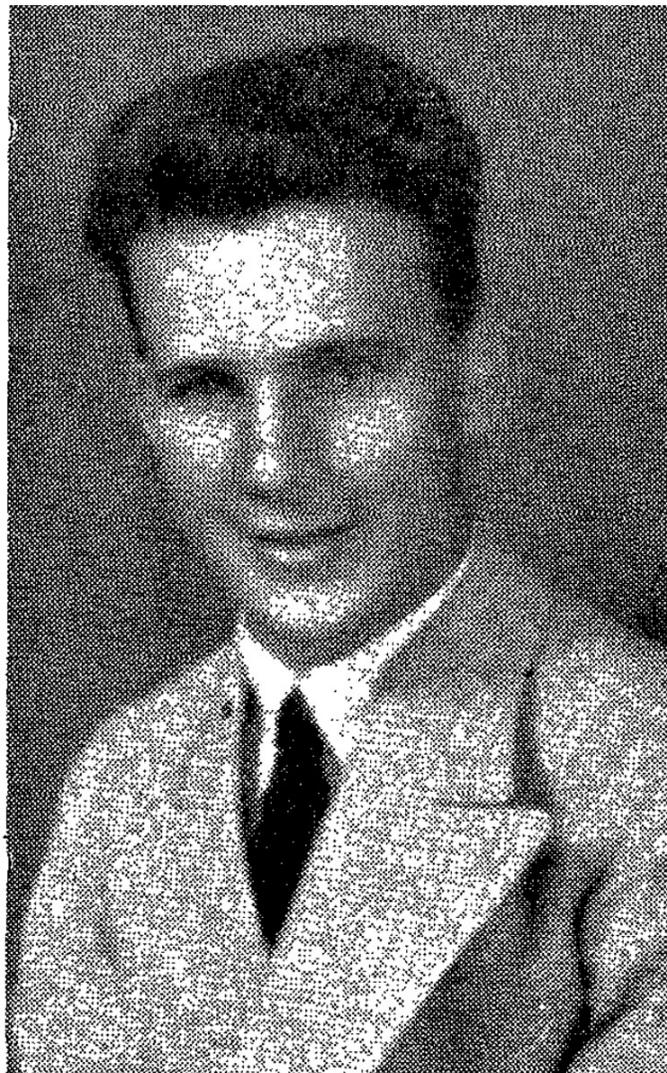
Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian*, *Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

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Trevor Collett was a self-supporting missionary working a timber plantation on the islands of Mussau and Emirau in New Guinea before World War II. His wife Olga and their daughter Anthea escaped to Australia but he lost his life in the Japanese invasion.

### Early years

Trevor Collett was born on July 10, 1913, in his parent's farmhouse on a sheep station called "Eskdale" near Wee Waa, New South Wales, Australia. His mother was a Seventh-day Adventist. He was a strong young man with a practical and easy-going temperament who excelled in sports. He attended the local public elementary school and, later, Maitland High School. He was inclined to his mother's faith and decided to do some studies at Australasian Missionary College in 1932 and 1933. He then sailed to the New Guinea islands to explore job prospects. Showing some entrepreneurial flair, he secured a coconut plantation on Mussau Island!<sup>1</sup> Having established himself in copra production, Collett returned to Australia to marry his sweetheart, Olga Wiles, a qualified nurse. They were married in the North New South Wales Conference office, Newcastle, on November 26, 1934. Both planned to devote themselves to self-supporting mission work.<sup>2</sup>



Trevor David Collett

From *Australasian Record*, July 4, 1946.

## Living in New Guinea

One child, Anthea, was born into the family in New Guinea. While managing a coconut plantation on the island of Mussau in the Saint Matthias group of islands, north of Kavieng, Collett became aware of good stands of cedar on nearby Emirau Island. He obtained a license to log and mill this resource and secured a contract to supply the government with building supplies. At the mill on Emirau and on the plantation on Mussau, Collett ensured that worship services were held daily with his workers. Children and youth who showed academic promise were directed to attend Jones Missionary College at Put Put to the south of Rabaul on the east coast of New Britain.<sup>3</sup>

When World War II broke out, there was little thought that it might impact their isolated place. That was not to be the case. In November 1940, the *SS Holmwood* and the *MS Rangitane* were sunk near New Zealand by patrolling German warships. The Germans picked up survivors but conditions on board became crowded and food supplies were so limited that they were off-loaded at Emirau Island. Collett took the small mission boat, the *Malalangi*, to Kavieng to alert government authorities of the predicament. After sheltering and feeding the survivors for a few days they were all ferried back to New Zealand. The grateful crew of *MS Rangitane* dispatched a generator to the Collett plantation and the New Zealand Prime Minister wrote a letter of thanks.<sup>4</sup>

Enemy troops, however, came closer to New Guinea. By Christmas 1941, there was a frantic scramble to ship all European women and children to Australia. Olga and Anthea Collett were among the many who said farewell to their husbands and fathers. They returned to the Collett family sheep station near Wee Waa. Civilian men were expected to make their own way in small craft at their own discretion, hoping to arrive at allied bases further south.<sup>5</sup>

Pastor Arthur Atkins was stationed on Mussau at the time. He and Collett were the most isolated of all the SDA missionaries in New Guinea. Collett arranged that he would light a huge bonfire to alert Atkins if the need to evacuate became urgent. Communications were poor and they did not reckon on the speed of the Japanese militia. On January 4, 1942, Japanese planes began bombing Rabaul. By January 22, troops were landing at Kavieng and Rabaul. About the same time as Atkins saw Collett's bonfire he also saw enemy troops landing near his home on Mussau.<sup>6</sup> He quickly brought the *Malalangi* from hiding and under cover of darkness picked up Collett and moved down the coast of New Ireland toward Rabaul.<sup>7</sup> All the time they were sailing in enemy territory. By traveling at night and camouflaging the boat by day it took them four days to reach the relative safety of Put Put Harbor and Jones Missionary College. They were just in time to see ahead of them another of their mission boats escaping with mission personnel. Both boats moved south, attempting to reach Sum Sum Bay where allied pilots were flying in and out with seaplanes to rescue any escapees. But the enemy spotted the mission boats and eventually sunk them. Collett and Atkins began to travel by canoe, but Atkins became ill with asthma. Collett refused to leave him. The two decided to paddle back to Kambubu to find medication. They remained for a short time and then Atkins deteriorated again. In desperation Collett sent a national runner to

Rabaul with a letter asking if the enemy would accept Atkins into the Roman Catholic hospital near Rabaul. The Japanese agreed and sent a truck to pick him up. Atkins was near collapse when they arrived. He died three weeks later. Collett was taken prisoner.<sup>8</sup>

During internment Collett and others were allowed to write only one letter to their loved ones. These letters were bundled into bags and dropped over Port Moresby by Japanese pilots in March 1942. The letters, including Collett's, gave a good report of kind treatment by their captors.<sup>9</sup> In retrospect it is hard not to think of this exercise as a ruse to disguise war crimes. The Japanese were torturing their prisoners. Some were executed for writing diaries. One hundred British soldiers were denied quinine and died of malaria.<sup>10</sup> At the same time Collett and Atkins were paddling back to Kambubu, the Japanese were capturing other unarmed escapees near Wide Bay and executing them at Tol Tol and Waitavalo plantations.<sup>11</sup> Later, a large group of Roman Catholic and Lutheran missionaries, together with women and children, were shot and thrown overboard from the Japanese ship *Akikaze*.<sup>12</sup> The Japanese also committed a massacre at Kavieng wharf, claiming the prisoners were aboard the *Kowa Maru* when it was sunk.<sup>13</sup>

## Collett's fate

Approximately three months after Collett's letter was dropped over Port Moresby it is believed by many that he and a thousand other prisoners were loaded onto the *Montevideo Maru* at Rabaul and lost their lives when it was sunk off the coast of the Philippines on July 1, 1942.<sup>14</sup> This account however, may in fact be a cover-up by the Japanese aggressors. It is countered by significant evidence, especially compelling testimony of local Tolai people living in Rabaul at the time. People later reported having seen Japanese soldiers taking prisoners in a truck from the Rabaul prison camp and returning empty prior to the ship's departure.<sup>15</sup> Some also said they saw the *Montevideo Maru* go out to sea heavily loaded with prisoners and return empty just prior to sailing for Japan. A list of one thousand prisoners said to be on board, later supplied by Japanese authorities, is said to be a list of those imprisoned at Rabaul, not necessarily those aboard the vessel.<sup>16</sup> The *Australasian Record* reported that two New Guinea missionaries spoke to Collett and other missionaries through the wire at the prison camp but on a second visit before the departure of the *Montevideo Maru* they were nowhere to be seen.<sup>17</sup> Local people told returning missionaries that Collett and other SDA prisoners were buried across the harbor at Matupit.<sup>18</sup> Some claims are contested but the allegation of a cover-up is consistent with other Japanese war crimes for which the perpetrators were tried and executed or imprisoned. It is also claimed that Australian military authorities were content to shift blame in order to mask their own inadequate defense of Rabaul.<sup>19</sup> All evidence considered, Collett, along with others, was probably executed some time before the war ended but exactly what occurred will remain a mystery.

## Legacy

Olga Collett did not remarry. The mill operated by the Colletts on Emirau was abandoned. The plantation he managed on Mussau, which bordered Atkin's mission station, was donated by Olga to the local SDA field.<sup>20</sup> It remains as a part of the Boliu mission headquarters on the island.

Trevor and Olga Collett were among a very small group who could be classed as Seventh-day Adventist self-supporting missionaries in the South Pacific. Theirs is a story of resourcefulness, courage and loyalty in the face of isolation and adversity.

## Editor's Note

The accounts of how Collett and the other SDA prisoners at Rabaul perished vary. While the author has presented evidence to support the account of their execution prior to the sailing of the *Montevideo Maru*, the reader should be aware that there is another school of thought which has the prisoners perishing aboard the *Montevideo Maru* when she was torpedoed by an Allied vessel (see, Abbott, Malcolm Edwin and Una Frances [Sprenkel]; Thompson, Leonard C. [1909-1942]). Whichever was the case, there is no disputing that Collett and over 1000 allied prisoners died tragically.

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## NOTES

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2. F[ran]cis A. Allum, "Collett-Wiles," *Australasian Record*, January 21, 1935, 7.
3. [Andrew G. Stewart], "We Will Remember Them," *Australasian Record*, January 7, 1946, 1-4.
4. Ibid.
5. Olga (Wiles) Collett, interview by Milton Hook, Kenthurst, New South Wales, June 29, 1986.
6. Ibid.
7. Constance M. Greive, "Smiling 'Seven Day' Boys from New Guinea," *Australasian Record*, October 28, 1946, 5.
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11. Max Uechtritz, "75 Years On, Shocking Tol Massacre Forgotten in Australia and PNG, February 5, 2017, accessed July 26, 2017, [asopa.typepad.com/asopa\\_people/2017/02/75-years-on-shocking-tol-massacre-forgotton-in-australia-png.html](http://asopa.typepad.com/asopa_people/2017/02/75-years-on-shocking-tol-massacre-forgotton-in-australia-png.html).
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