

Thompson, Leonard C. (1909–1942)

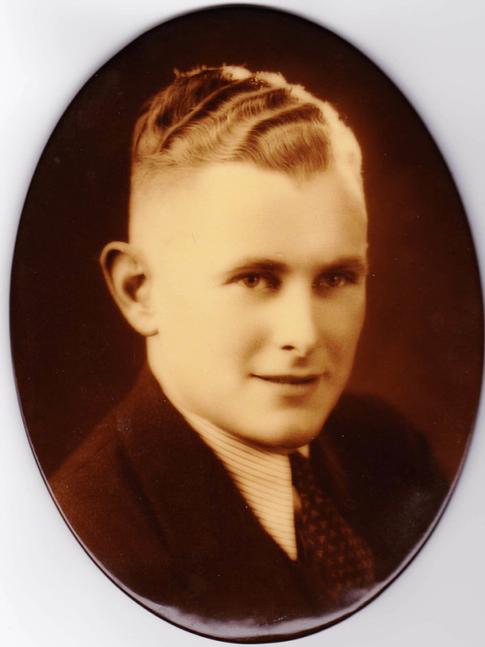
LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

Leonard C. Thompson was the son of Mr. and Mrs. C. J. Thompson, of Albury. He was born in Victoria, Australia, in 1909.¹ Leonard Thompson trained at Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital, graduating from the nursing course in 1933. He then worked as part of the hospital staff for the next two or three years.

In December 1935, Thompson married nursing classmate Eileen Lethbridge from Perth in Western Australia. After Thompson qualified in radiography at Sydney University, the young couple accepted an appointment with the Public Health Department in the mandated territory of New Guinea. Their service was cut short when Thompson became a prisoner of war during the Japanese invasion during World War II. Thompson's commitment was such that he preceded his family out to New Guinea two years before his wife and oldest daughter could get approval to join him.²

Before the start of World War II, the Thompsons lost their three-year old daughter to illness while living in Madang.³ With the Japanese invasion imminent in December 1941, many government employees and missionaries, especially women and children, were directed to leave Papua and New Guinea.⁴ Eileen Thompson and their infant second daughter, Lynette, were evacuated back to Australia and went to live for the duration of the war with Eileen Thompson's mother in Perth.⁵



Leonard Thompson

From *Australasian Record*, July 4, 1946

Thompson could have evacuated with his family, but with so many expatriates leaving, he chose to remain at his post in Rabaul, New Britain, continuing to provide medical support to the local people. Thompson was one of four Seventh-day Adventists captured by the Japanese—a group that included Stanley Arthur Atkins, Malcolm Edwin Abbott, and Trevor David Collett. Their commitment and sense of duty to the local people cost them their lives at the hands of the occupying Japanese authorities. As a prisoner of war, Atkins died in a Japanese-controlled hospital very early in the occupation, while Abbott, Collett, and Thompson were subsequently killed.⁶ The exact nature of Thompson's death is disputed.

Thompson, along with another 1052 men, was packed onto the *Montevideo Maru* for transportation to Hainan Island leaving Rabaul on June 22, 1942. Aboard this prison ship were some 845 servicemen and 208 civilians.⁷ According to the National Archives of Australia:

Of the 1396 Australian military personnel at Rabaul before the attack, 160 were killed south of the town at Tol, about 400 eventually escaped to Australia, and the remainder became prisoners of war (POWs). After the invasion, most civilians gathered around Rabaul where the Japanese forces set up a camp for civilian and military prisoners. In June and July 1942, the Japanese naval authorities made two attempts to transfer these prisoners to Japan. The first group, of about 60 Australian officers and 18 women, including Army nurses, arrived safely. The second, historically thought to include 845 POWs and 208 civilian internees, left on 22 June for Hainan on the *Montevideo Maru*, a freighter requisitioned by the Japanese navy. It was not marked as a POW carrier. On 1 July it was torpedoed and sunk by the submarine USS *Sturgeon* off the Philippine island of Luzon, resulting in the deaths of all prisoners and internees on board. The loss of life on the *Montevideo Maru* is described as the worst maritime disaster, in peace or war, in Australian history.⁸

The families of these men knew nothing of their fate until after the end of the war when Japanese records, including the names of the prisoners who had been on board the *Montevideo Maru*, were translated and the Commonwealth of Australia's Minister for External Affairs was able to let the families know the men had been on board the *Montevideo Maru* when it was torpedoed.⁹ The translated list of those who were lost is readily available. The list is divided into service personnel who were regarded as "prisoners of war," and civilians who were regarded as "internees."¹⁰ Thompson is listed as internee number 25.¹¹

In the years following the war, some doubt was raised as to whether the prisoner passenger manifest of the *Montevideo Maru*, known as the "nominal list," was accurate. There appears to be significant evidence, especially compelling testimony of local Tolai people living in Rabaul at the time, that prisoners were executed prior to the ship's departure for Japan and subsequent torpedoing. According to these sources, Japanese soldiers transported the prisoners from the Rabaul prison camp in a truck that returned empty.¹² 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. The list of 1053 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.¹³ The *Australasian Record* reported that

two New Guinea missionaries spoke to “Doctor” Thompson and other missionaries through the wire at the prison camp, but on a second visit before the departure of the *Montevideo Maru* “the white men were gone.”¹⁴ All evidence considered, Thompson, along with others, may well have been executed some time before the war ended, but just exactly what occurred will remain a mystery.¹⁵

On Sunday, July 1, 2012, the Montevideo Maru Memorial was dedicated in Canberra, by Mrs. Quentin Bryce, then Governor General of Australia. Another speaker that day made a particularly pertinent observation to the 800 people attending, mostly relatives of those being remembered that day. He urged all present to consider the newly dedicated memorial to mean more than the sinking of a ship. Instead, he said, the memorial should commemorate all those who lived, suffered, and died during the horrible circumstances of the occupation of Rabaul, in which case it mattered little if they lost their lives on land or at sea.¹⁶

Editor’s Note

The accounts of how Thompson and the other SDA prisoners at Rabaul perished vary. While the author has presented evidence to support the account of the prisoners perishing aboard the *Montevideo Maru* when it was torpedoed by an Allied vessel, the reader should be aware that there is another school of thought which has them being executed prior to the sailing of the *Montevideo Maru* (see Collett, Trevor David [1913-1942]). Whichever was the case, there is no disputing that Thompson and over 1000 allied prisoners died tragically.

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"We Will Remember Them." *Australasian Record*, January 7, 1946.

NOTES

1. "We Will Remember Them," *Australasian Record*, January 7, 1946, 4.
2. Lyn (Thompson) Baird, daughter of Len Thompson, interview with the author, November 14, 2018, Cooranbong, New south Wales, Australia.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. "We Will Remember Them," 4.
6. Ibid.
7. "Prisoners on board the *Montevideo Maru*," Australian Government National Archives of Australia, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://montevideomaru.naa.gov.au/timeline/>.
8. Ibid; see also Australian War Memorial, "*Montevideo Maru*—Sinking of the *Montevideo Maru*, 1 July 1942," accessed February 24, 2018, https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/montevideo_maru.
9. "We Will Remember Them," *Australasian Record*, January 7, 1946, 3.
10. "*Montevideo Maru*—List of Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees on Board," Australia Government National Archives of Australia, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://montevideomaru.naa.gov.au/>.
11. Ibid.
12. "Aftermath," Australian Government National Archives of Australia, accessed February 24, 2018, <http://montevideomaru.naa.gov.au/timeline/>; Rose-Marie Radley, interview by Milton Hook, Wahroonga, New South Wales, July 1, 1986.
13. Margaret Reeson, *A Very Long War: The Families Who Waited* (Melbourne, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 75.
14. Constance M. Greive, "Smiling 'Seven Day' Boys from New Guinea," *Australasian Record*, October 28, 1946, 5.

15. See Trevor David Collett [1913-1942] for an alternative account of the fate of the Rabaul prisoners.

16. Lester D. Devine, personal knowledge having been present on July 1, 2012 at the dedication of the Montevideo Memorial in Canberra; Australian War Memorial, "Rabaul and *Montevideo Maru* memorial," accessed February 24, 2018, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/visitor-information/sculpture-garden/rabaul-montevideo-mar-memorial>.

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