

Rodolph Wheldon

..... known as "Bones" Wheldon and his brother Edward "Nigger" Wheldon were recorded playing with the Camperdown Rugby League B Grade team between 1922 and 1924. Edward Wheldon was selected for the Newtown President's Cup team in 1923 and 1924.

game. "Bones" Wheldon, Camperdown's pocket-edition half, knows all the tricks of a veteran, and his elder brother is an ideal full back.

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under the posts. "Nigger" Wheldon paid the penalty of working too close to his three-quarter line.

ture half-back, Bones Wheldon, into the pack, and Reader himself made an extra back, which allowed Petersham to hook monotonously. Wick had bad luck to

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Edward Wheldon was a regular starter in Wests Reserve Grade team in 1925 and 1926. Rodolph Wheldon joined his brother at Wests from Newtown in June 1926. It is not clear how he was able to do this without any apparent clearance from the Newtown Club. It would appear that Newtown were expecting Rodolph to play with them on the day he turned out with Wests.

Rodolph and Edward Wheldon played a number of games in the halves for Wests Reserve Grade before Rodolph was called up to make his First Grade debut, on 26 July 1926, to replace Harry Owen who had broken his hand. However, the next week, Rodolph was again selected in Wests Reserve Grade team.

The Rugby League News on 7 August 1926 had R Wheldon listed in Wests Reserve Grade team and also R Welton as a reserve in Newtown's Reserve Grade team. The Rugby League News on 14 and 21 August did not list R Wheldon in any of West's teams but again had him listed as a reserve for the Newtown Reserve Grade team.

It appears that Rodolph Wheldon had a change of mind and decided to return to Newtown late in the season. There is no record which explains the reason for these actions by Rodolph nor have any reports been found dealing with a clearance back to Newtown. This may remain a mystery.

In 1927, Edward Wheldon remained a fixture in Wests Reserve Grade team, but also made his First Grade debut that year. Rodolph did not play for Newtown in 1927, but was still active, playing for the Croydon A Grade team and also being selected to captain Wests President's Cup team. The father of Rodolph and Edward, Thomas Wheldon was a committee man for Wests in 1927.

The question that arises is what was the connection with the Newtown Club and how did Rodolph appear to move between Wests and Newtown without any issue being raised regarding residential qualification and obtaining necessary clearances?

Rodolph's father, Thomas Wheldon enlisted with the AIF for service in the First World War, and at the time of enlistment was living at Gibbens St Camperdown in the Newtown district. Thomas Wheldon saw action in France and was severely affected by mustard gas shelling, such that he was invalided back to Australia. In 1919, the Repatriation Department placed notices in the newspapers

seeking employment for invalided servicemen. One of these was Thomas Wheldon, former painter who was wanting a caretakers position.

In the early 1920's it appeared that there was an estrangement between Thomas and his wife, which may have been due to his employment situation. His wife and no doubt the children remained at Camperdown as both Rodolph and Edward were able to play for the local Camperdown team in the Newtown District. Thomas Wheldon at this time was recorded living at Holborrow St Crow's Nest in the North Sydney area, However Holborrow St is actually at Croydon Park in the Western Suburbs district. The family came together again by the late 1920's. This is most likely the reason why Rodolph and Edward Wheldon were able to move between the Newtown and Western Suburbs districts.

Rodolph Wheldon enlisted with the Second AIF on 4 June 1940. He was posted to the Royal Australian Artillery, 17th Anti Tank Battery with the designation of Gunner. He completed his training in Sydney and embarked for Papua New Guinea arriving in Rabaul in late September 1941. By January 1942 he was listed as "Missing"



17th Anti Tank Battery - Rodolph Wheldon

In June and July 1942 two drafts of Australians captured on New Britain embarked for Japan. One draft, containing about 60 officers and 19 Australian women (including 6 Army nurses) led by Colonel J. J. Scanlan, reached Japan safely. The 19 Australian women who reached Japan from New Britain with Scanlan's party in July 1942 were at length transferred to a camp at Totsuka, about 20 miles from Yokohama, where they remained until the end of the war. Forty five officers (including Colonel Scanlan) were taken to Nishi Ashi-Betu, on Hokkaido to work in the coal mine.

The other draft of 1,050 prisoners (including about 200 civilians) sailed in the *Montevideo Maru* , from Rabaul, destined for Japan. However, the ship was sunk by an American submarine off Luzon in the South China Sea on 1 July 1942. No prisoners of war survived the sinking.

During the Second World War the *Montevideo Maru* was used by the Imperial Japanese Navy as an auxiliary vessel transporting troops and provisions throughout South East Asia. As a part of the Kure Naval District, the vessel participated in landings at Makassar in the Netherlands East Indies. After operating in the Japanese islands, the *Montevideo Maru* returned to Java before sailing for New Britain.

Early on the morning of 22 June 1942, members of the Australian 2/22nd Battalion, No.1 Independent Company, and civilian prisoners captured in New Britain were ordered to board the

vessel. For the march to the waterfront, Japanese guards divided the prisoners into groups of approximately fifty men. Only the officers and a small number of civilians were left in the Malaguna Road camp. The *Montevideo Maru* sailed unescorted for Hainan Island, keeping to the east of the Philippines in an effort to avoid Allied submarines.

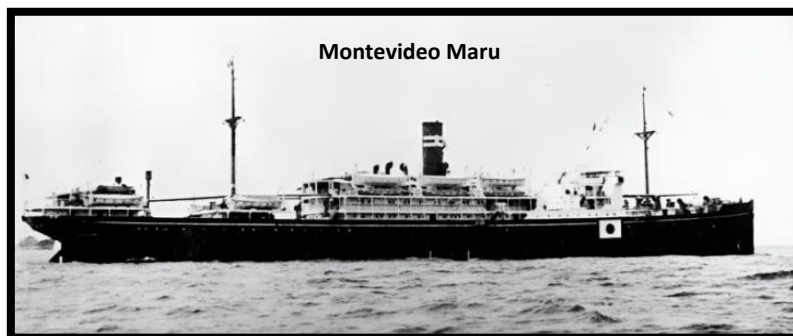
Eight days into the voyage, the *Montevideo Maru* was spotted by the American submarine USS *Sturgeon*. For approximately four hours the *Sturgeon* manoeuvred into a position to fire its four stern torpedoes. The USS *Sturgeon*'s log records an impact at 2.29 am, approximately 100 feet (30 metres) aft of the funnel. 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.

According to both the *Sturgeon*'s log and the Japanese survivors, the *Montevideo Maru* sank by the stern in as little as eleven minutes from the torpedo impact. Although the Japanese crew were ordered to abandon ship, it does not appear they made any attempt to assist the prisoners to do likewise. The ship's lifeboats were launched but all capsized and one suffered severe damage. Of the 88 Japanese guards and crew, only 17 survived the sinking and subsequent march through the Philippine jungle.

While the exact number and identity of the more than 1,000 men aboard the *Montevideo Maru* has never been confirmed, Japanese and Australian sources suggest an estimated 845 military personnel and up to 208 civilians lost their lives in the tragedy.

Considerable efforts were made by both the International Red Cross and the Australian government to seek details of the *Montevideo Maru*'s passengers from the Japanese authorities. Despite evidence that the Japanese navy forwarded information about the loss of the vessel to Japan's Prisoner of War Information Bureau as early as January 1943, Australian authorities were not provided with a list of casualties until October 1945, when Major H.S. Williams of the Recovered Personnel Division in Tokyo began investigations into the loss of *Montevideo Maru*. In April 2023 it was announced that the wreck of the *Montevideo Maru* was found four kilometres down on the sea bed off the coast of the Phillipines. The wreck and any remains will not be disturbed, but will remain as a memorial to the worst maritime disaster in Australia's history.

Rodolph Wheldon lost his life in the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* and his memorial is located at the Rabaul War Cemetery, Kokopo, East New Britain, Papua New Guinea.



AUSTRALIAN
IMPERIAL FORCE
ROYAL AUSTRALIAN
ARTILLERY
17 ANTI TANK BATTERY

GUNNERS
VX31527 SPENCER A. E.
NX72179 STRANGE J. C.
VX25487 STREET C. L.
NX55060 THORNTON G. H. W.
NX53269 TRIGG K. A.
NX59798 WARE F. R.
NX27388 WHELDON R.