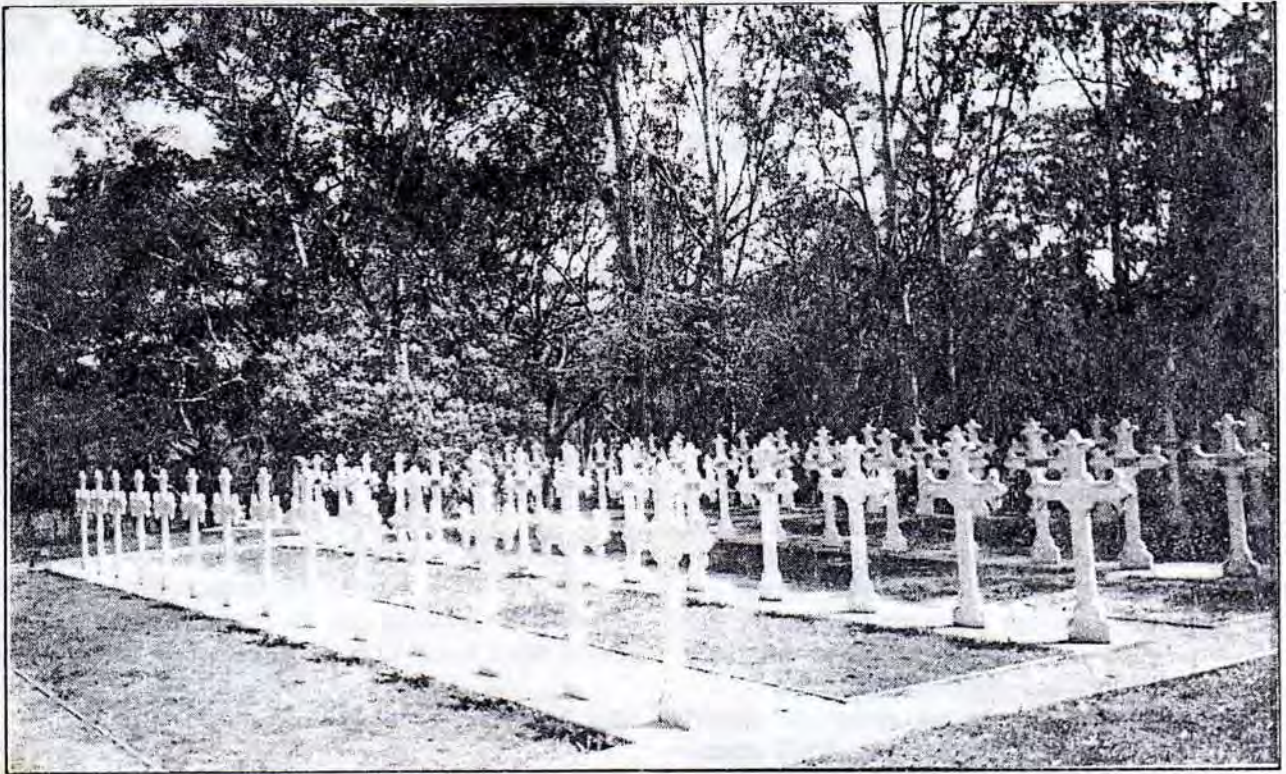


Mittagong remembers Marist Brothers slain during wartime



□ The Brothers' Cemetery at Mittagong

This item appeared in the Catholic Weekly of August 12th, 1992. Unfortunately the writer and source were not identified.

On a quiet hillside on a property outside the New South Wales town of Mittagong lies a small cemetery with a memorial to three young Australians who lost their lives in the Solomon Islands during World War II.

It is unusual for non-servicemen killed in war to have such a memorial in their homeland. These men were members of a religious teaching group engaged in a peaceful mission when their lives were cut short by the war. The memorial is a tribute to their sacrifice.

The story of their deaths and that of three other young men who narrowly escaped execution by Japanese soldiers is worth recalling as this month marks the 50th anniversary of these events.

Back in the late 1920s, John Roberts, Frederick Mannes and Francis Fitzgerald joined the Marist Brothers, a Catholic teaching group well known throughout Australia.

They were given, as was the custom then, religious names and were known as Brother John, Brother Augustine and Brother Donatus.

In 1941 Brother John was teaching at a mission school at Marau in the South Solomons, Au-

gustine was headmaster at the Brothers' school at Mosman in Sydney and Donatus was on the staff of St Joseph's College Hunters Hill when volunteers were sought to open a school at Chabai in the North Solomons. There were 30 applicants. Augustine and Donatus were selected along with Peter McDonough (Brother Ervan) headmaster at Lismore.

The trio travelled in July 1941 to Tulagi in the South Solomons where a fateful Australian cable told Ervan to go to Marau and John to join Augustine and Donatus at Chabai. This decision had a far reaching effect on John and Ervan.

On arrival at Chabai in November 1941 they began their peaceful mission of teaching the islanders to read and write and to develop farming skills. The St Joseph's College magazine of 1941 has an article with references to a letter sent from Donatus. He wrote:

"Some of the boys are old boys. Their ages range from 14 to 30. Each boy is paid for coming to school — they receive one stick of tobacco per week and at half past 10 each morning are allowed 10 minutes recess for smoko."

He commented on the creeping things about and wrote "before getting into bed, at night, you have to look around the floor, under the bed, round the walls to make sure there are no centipedes about. The first thing to do before putting on shoes in the morning is to bang them on the floor and shake them well."

On March 13, 1942, the Japanese landed at Buka and occupied Bougainville. On May 3 they landed at Tulagi in the South Solomons intending to set up an air base to control the Coral Sea.

What happened to the three Brothers during this time is unclear but they were under house arrest and in July were taken to and confined on Sohana Island at the mouth of Buka Passage.

Nothing further was heard of them.

After the war the Minister for External Affairs, Mr Eddie Ward, wrote to the Marist Brothers informing them that under the provisions of the National Security (War Deaths) Regulations they had been presumed dead. This letter said it seemed clear that the three Brothers were placed aboard a Japanese warship at Sohano, Buka Passage, but subsequent to that date no trace of them had been found....

It has been determined that the Brothers became missing on August 20, 1942.

This was accepted as the official version of what happened and August 20 was taken as the anniversary date of their deaths.

It was also believed that the vessel was the *Montevideo Maru*.

Australia's official war history records that 1050 Australian troops and about 200 civilians were lost when the *Montevideo Maru* was torpedoed and sunk by an American submarine off Luzon in the South China Sea on July 1, 1942.

So what did happen?

Brother Valens Boyle in his book *Sacrifice Not Romance*, a history of the Marist Brothers in the Solomons, throws some light on the matter.

In 1946, an old boy of St Joseph's College, Laurie Chan, wrote to the Brothers about incidents that took place at Chabai in 1942 when he lived there. He told how the Japanese thought Brother John was a spy and placed them all under house arrest. Laurie confirms that he saw them taken by barge to the island at the mouth of the passage. He recalls one significant day when a Japanese officer told him "Three Australia Christie go Australia today". This he presumed meant that there was to be an exchange of prisoners and they were going back home. After the war when he heard they were missing he presumed that their boat had been torpedoed or bombed on its voyage.

Many years later Laurie came to the view that the Japanese were talking in the fashion of their beliefs, that the spirit goes back to the land of their birth after death. He now believes that the officer was telling him that the three Brothers were to be beheaded.

This idea is supported by a Marist Brother who recalls a discussion he had with a former serviceman who was in Australian Military Intelligence and was among the first into the Solomons after the islands were recaptured. The soldier had been taught at Hawthorn in Melbourne by Brother John and he asked the natives what had happened. They told him John had been beheaded, illustrating their comments with good mimes.

It is still uncertain what did happen. In all probability the Brothers were executed on Sohana Island and their bodies burnt.

But we do know what happened at Marau in the South Solomons and how three others, including Peter McDonough, narrowly escaped death at the hands of the Japanese.

Peter McDonough instead of going to the North Solomons and certain death joined Brother James Thrift and Brother Ephrem Stevens who had both been at Marau since 1938.

On August 7, 1942, U.S. bombers destroyed two sampans of Japanese in Marau Harbour. Next day a party of Japanese soldiers rounded up the three Brothers and two priests and accused them of being spies who had radioed the Americans with details of Japanese movements. They wanted the radio. When it was not produced the order was given for them all to be executed. A light machine gun was set up in front of them and the senior officer



□ Brothers Augustine, John and Donatus.

produced his sword bringing its blade close to their throats. The Brothers were convinced that their last moments of life had come. James Thrift said he stretched his neck out so that if death came by blade and not by bullet, it would be swift and sure.

At the critical moment U.S. planes flew over and continued to do so for some time as they were landing 10,000 troops at Lunga. The Japanese released their prisoners and all went inside.

There was a hidden radio. Three months before an American ditched his plane on the sea, came ashore in a dinghy bringing the plane's radio. It was concealed in some disused tins and carefully brought out each night to hear news of what was happening in the war.

When the Japanese asked for some potatoes to be cooked for a meal, Ephrem Stevens told the boys to get some from the garden, speaking to them in the native language.

He also told them to get the radio and drop it in the sea.

The Japanese left shortly after and the Brothers saw no more of them and resumed their work.

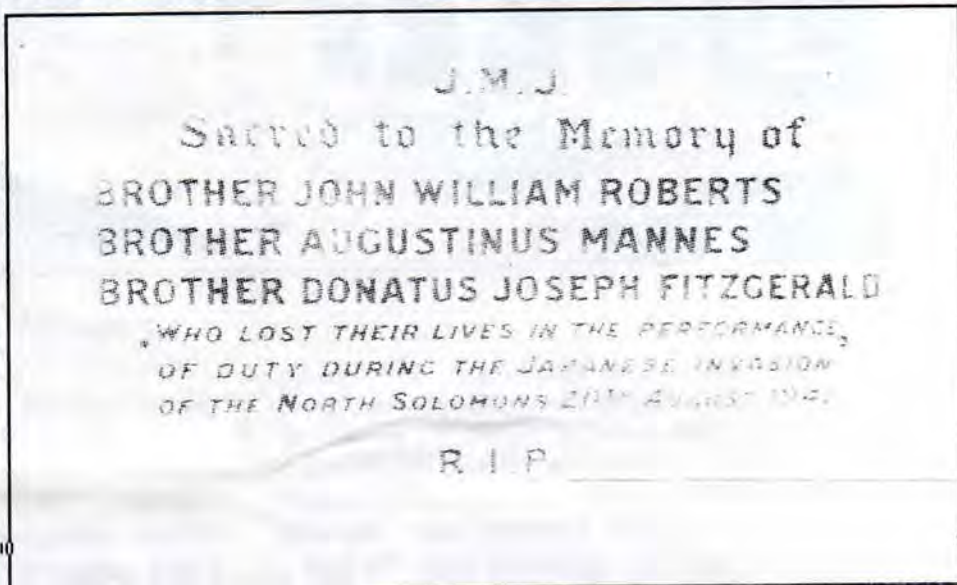
When asked in November by the Americans to evacuate, the Brothers reluctantly boarded a troopship that took them to the

New Hebrides. They made their way to Melbourne by signing on as shipwrights on a Norwegian ship.

Ephrem Stevens returned to the islands after the war and stayed there until the 1960s. He died in 1988. James Thrift taught in a number of schools before spending the last 25 years of his life at the Mittagong property where he was gardener, chauffeur, apiarist and handyman. He died in 1983, aged 82.

All these men in this story were unselfish and generous men, who toiled on foreign soil to help with the education of the inhabitants of the Solomon Islands. Three of them lost their lives doing so.

The Marist Brothers are proud of them and have shown this with the simple monument in the Mittagong cemetery. ■



□ Commemorative headstone in the Mittagong Cemetery.

REMAR Australia

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at

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For further details, contact:
Br Mark Paul at Parkville
[03] 347 2671

NEWMAN COLLEGE JUNIOR SCHOOL

Perth

24.8.92

Dear Brother,

The children from our school had a mission day on Thursday, June 5th. Brigidine Campus organised a Lapathon and Marist Campus held a Spellathon. The proceeds raised on the day totalled \$3000. As we are trying to strengthen the Brigidine and Marist traditions in our school the money raised is to be halved and sent to the Brigidine and Marist Missions.

Please find enclosed cheque for \$1500.

We would appreciate having some feedback on how the money is used. This will help the students realise that their efforts have some personal impact.

The feedback may include photographs, letters or a representative from an order coming to the school to acknowledge the children's efforts.

Yours sincerely,

Greg Green

Religious Education Co-ordinator.