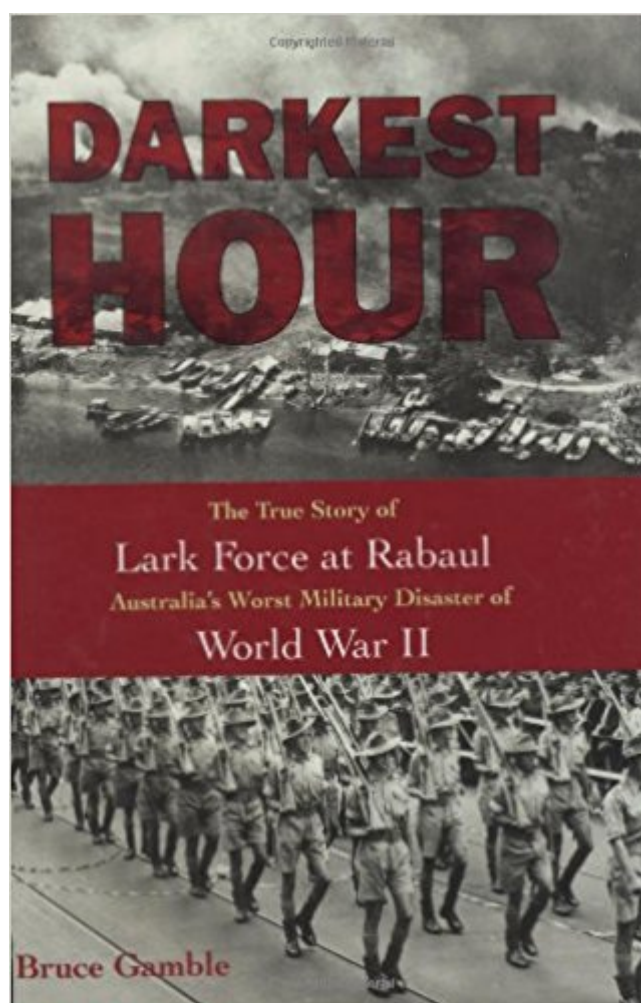


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# Darkest Hour: The True Story Of Lark Force At Rabaul - Australia's Worst Military Disaster Of World War II



## Synopsis

January 23, 1942, New Britain. It was 2:30 a.m., the darkest hour of the day and, for the defenders of this Southwest Pacific island, soon to be the war's darkest hour. Fifteen hundred men and six nurses, Lark Force, had been deployed to New Britain to fortify and defend Rabaul, capital of Australia's mandated territories. Once they'd completed their work on the strategic port and its two airfields, the group-mostly volunteers from Victoria-had settled into the routine of garrison duties, confident of being relieved within a year. But the Japanese had other ideas. Rabaul was the linchpin of their campaign to conquer the Southwest Pacific-and in the early hours of January 23 their invasion force swarmed ashore. What ensued is the story told in *The Darkest Hour*, a gut-wrenching account of courage and sacrifice, folly and disaster, as seen through the eyes of the few who survived. Bruce Gamble, the critically acclaimed author of *Black Sheep One*, follows key individuals-soldiers and junior officers, an American citizen and an Army nurse among them-through their experiences in Lark Force. Together their stories comprise a harrowing picture of the Australian forces overrun and driven into the jungle, prey to the unforgiving environment and a cruel enemy that massacred its prisoners-and tormented further by fate, when a Japanese ship transporting prisoners to Hainan Island was torpedoed by an American submarine. The dramatic stories of the Lark Force survivors, told here in full for the first time, are among the most inspiring of the Pacific War.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

WWII History Magazine, May 2007"For whatever reason, far too few books about Australia's

participation in World War II make it to these shores. Had it not been for Bruce Gamble's remarkable history of Aussie courage at Rabaul, comparable at least with the American and Filipino doomed defense of Corregidor Island or the brave but futile U.S. stand at Wake Island, few Americans would know what went on there...Author Gamble pored over forgotten files and official reports and conducted interviews with the handful of surviving veterans to craft this tragic, heroic story. A terrific tale about a little-known (to Americans) battle."WW2 Database (online), February 2007

–“Exhaustively researched and descriptively written, Gamble's narrative of Darkest Hour is rich in detail but yet still easy to read. Pick up a copy, settle into your favorite chair, and be careful not to get lost in the wild growth of the South Pacific jungles.

• World War II, June 2007

–“The author takes a grunt's-eye view of not just the battle, but its horrid aftermaths for POWs.

•

Darkest Hour tells the story of Australia's worst military disaster as it was experienced by survivors of the Japanese invasion of Rabaul, New Britain, in 1942. Bruce Gamble, critically acclaimed author of Black Sheep One, follows members of Lark Force, the Southwest Pacific island's defenders, through their harrowing flight into the jungle, their struggle against an unforgiving environment and a cruel enemy that massacred its prisoners; and the further torments of fate, when a Japanese ship transporting prisoners is torpedoed by an American submarine. Exhaustively researched, this is a gut-wrenching account of courage and sacrifice, folly and disaster, as seen through the eyes of the few who survived. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

With few exceptions the Japanese attack in the South Pacific and South-east Asia was met by British Commonwealth or American troops fighting under poor leadership, using older equipment and facing a psychologically superior enemy with a demoralised mindset. Lark Force at Rabaul was such a force. Their collapse was perhaps even more poignant and certainly more speedy, than almost any other in the region -- within two hours of the Japanese landing at Rabaul, the entire force of 1400 men was completely dislodged from their initial positions. Within 24 hours the rag-tag remnants were running in every direction, some through dense trackless jungle to avoid the fate of imprisonment or worse...The author reminds us that none of this was foreordained. The dispositions of the Australians were poor, their leadership abysmal and their planning probably some of the worst in the theatre. In Bataan the Americans set up a jungle base to battle the Japanese, without support for 6 months. At Rabaul, the requests of the junior officers to build up just such jungle

redoubts was regarded as defeatist and overruled. When the storm struck however, there were innumerable tales of individual courage, treks through the jungle, encounters with headhunters, and the individual resources of few sometimes triumphing over the hundreds of Japanese soldiers trailing them. In the end however, 1000 soldiers of Lark Force went into the bag. About 200 were massacred outright after being taken prisoner, further down the coast. The rest were aboard the Montevideo Maru being transhipped to Hainan Island when they were torpedoed by the USS Sturgeon. Not a man survived. It is still the worst marine tragedy in Australian history. The fact that I read this book in 48 hours should be testament enough to how thrilling and engrossing it is. Highly recommended. The author, an American, also does a very good job in his retelling of the AIF story of Lark Force and is well at home with Commonwealth Command, and colourful language and Digger culture.

The author describes the travails of the Lark force, a reinforced Australian infantry battalion tasked with the defense of Rabaul against Japanese assault. He covers the inception of the force, the situation and significance of Rabaul, as well as the actual fighting and the attempts at escaping from the Japanese and the tragic fate of most POWs. The author does not shy away from Japanese atrocities, nor from accusing the Australian government from contributing to a disastrous outcome. All in all, a great book about a minor action.

As a son of a member of Lark Force this is the best account I have read. My father was one of the "lucky ones". He avoided capture, he avoided Tol Plantation bayonetting, he avoided being drowned on the Montevideo Maru and he turned up in Port Moresby after 99 days as missing presumed dead. And he never spoke about it - but he did record the saga in a gripping journal. Bruce Gamble tells it all so accurately with incredible research. So sad that my father never got to read this account.

This book goes deep into the experiences of the Aussie soldiers after they enlist into the army in 1940 and 1941, and then are sent to the nearby island of New Britain, the soldiers vainly defending their posts as the Japanese invade the island, and then once their colonel and his staff flee from their command post, the whole command disintegrates and scatters into the jungle. Most of the soldiers are caught by the Japs and nearly 200 of them are executed. A lucky few manage to survive these massacres, badly injured, and managed to tell their story in the end after their horrifying struggle to survive. Only a couple hundred soldiers and other personnel manage to be

rescued from their imprisoned island, even after the Australian government had abandoned this garrison to their fate, but the most tragic part of the book is the journey of about 1000 POW's on a Japanese "hell ship" until it is torpedoed by a lucky shot from an American submarine and sent to the bottom in just barely 12 minutes. None of the POW's managed to survive, and even the author of this book gives you a pondering thought on what the last moments of these poor men might have been, locked in the holds of a ship that is already on it's last journey to the bottom. It also makes you wonder how the submarine captains might have felt once they discovered that the Japanese ship they just sunk, and most likely got commended for, had been carrying Allied prisoners of war by the hundreds, and in some cases like the tragic "Junyo Maru" incident in 1944, prisoners by the thousands. This book is a must-read for those who feel like they need to read stories involving soldiers that had been abandoned by their own government and having to go through a terrible ordeal to survive in order to tell their stories, which end up getting published in books like these. Jungle warfare is no joke, and in this book, you'll find out why.

I chose four stars because this is a story of a reserve Australian army unit assigned to a remote Australian Island prior to Japans attack on Pearl Harbor. After it becomes obvious to the Australian General staff that this small under supplied unit is in harms way, the decision is made to leave them in place, poorly trained, equipped and led, to face the Japanese army. Their story is absolutely amazing and it all comes down to mere survival and the very bad decisions made by poor leaders who contributed to the death of many of these poor deserted soldiers. The survivors must do the impossible to just escape death or capture. This is a riveting unbelievable story of what happens to a band of part-time soldiers who are suddenly left on their own to face a fierce enemy that they have neither been equipped or trained to do. This is far from the usual WWII battle accounts and makes Bataan seem like a normal military defeat. Read this and be amazed as I was.

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