

# Archives reveal Japanese atrocities on Diggers kept secret

By Rory Callinan  
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When officials found human remains in an old Japanese medical dump in Papua New Guinea this year, they may have done more than locate two missing World War II commandos.

They may have unlocked a 68-year-old Pandora's box of secrets involving ongoing censorship and the failure to punish those involved in some of the worst war crimes ever perpetrated on Australian soldiers during the Pacific war.



Spencer Walklate.

In April the ADF confirmed it had discovered bones suspected of being those of missing commandos Spencer Walklate and Ron Eagleton on Kairiru Island about 20 kilometres from Wewak on Papua New Guinea's northern coast. Walklate, 27, a one-time St George rugby league player,

and Eagleton, 20, had gone missing during a raid to reconnoitre Japanese gun emplacements on Mushu Island to the south of Kairiru Island on April 11, 1945.

The raid failed when their boats capsized in the surf before they reached the beach and they were attacked before they could target their objective. Hunted across the island, the eight Australians fought on bravely in skirmishes before most were killed or wounded.



Ron Eagleton.

Eagleton and Walklate were thought to have tried to avoid capture by floating out into the ocean on palm logs where they either drowned or were quickly killed by the Japanese. But when the bones were found on Kairiru Island this year and information was provided from elderly island residents, it suggests the men suffered a far more horrific fate - one that had been covered up for years.

Previously secret documents from the archives reveal the two were thought to have been horrifically dissected and their organs served up in a ritual dinner to Japanese soldiers, or souvenired and taken back to Japan. The Japanese soldiers were never brought to justice and the facts

have been kept from the dead men's families. Details of the atrocities were suppressed and some continue to be so.

They are also misrepresented in official military files, raising questions about other such crimes being covered up.

The revelations this week prompted Scott Walklate, the grandson of Spencer, and some of those involved in the efforts to find the men to call for information about such cases to be made public so Australians are fully informed about the sacrifices made by Australian soldiers.

"It's as bad as the German war crimes and those criminals are still coming out," says NSW resident Walklate who had no idea about how his grandfather died until informed by Fairfax Media. "I'm not interested in getting revenge, it's a waste of energy and time. But in saying that I ... think the Australian people should know just what sort of sacrifice that all the soldiers made for us to live a good life."

Walklate and Eagleton's case was quietly mothballed in the 1950s after a decision by the Australian government to release dozens of suspected war criminals following a change in foreign policy towards Japan and pressure from the United States government to wrap up the war crimes trials.

According to documents obtained by Fairfax, Walklate and Eagleton's killers' case file was downgraded to an alphabetically rated "G" status "involving Australians or allied nationals and in which the accused if convicted would be unlikely to be awarded the death sentence".

The controversial ranking system allowed those criminals nominated in the G cases, including dozens of murderers, rapists and torturers, to walk free and their files to gather dust in the archives. In some cases, the details about the horrific treatment by Japanese troops remains censored, as section 33 (1) g of the Archives Act exempts public access to records if it will involve the unreasonable disclosure of personal information including that of a deceased person. Fairfax has been told some of the

allegations of cannibalism and other references to atrocities by Japanese on Walklate and Eagleton appear to have been censored or removed from the files.

However, in copies of the G files obtained by Fairfax, there is a graphic reference to the murder of the Australians captured on Kairiru Island about April 1945. The men are not named but there is little doubt they are the victims, given the timing and circumstances of their treatment.

"After capture, they were beaten with sticks, slapped in the face and kicked by some of the accused. It was then decided to execute the PW [prisoner of war]," says the reference. "One prisoner, whilst awaiting his execution, was beaten about the feet and legs to such an extent that he could not stand. He was thereupon executed where he was then sitting by being struck a heavy blow [by a sword] on the back of the neck.

"The second PW was then executed by shooting and liver and portions of the flesh were removed."

The document notes 17 individuals are accused of involvement in the crime.

Another file unearthed from the archives by author Don Dennis, who wrote a book about the raid and whose uncle was one of the few survivors, confirms the censorship relating to the hideous treatment of the two commandos. Dennis also found a memorandum detailing an interview with Japanese soldier Oagawa Waichi, who is suspected of beheading the men, but all details relating to the dissection and cannibalism appear to have been censored from documents.

Waichi was reported to have committed suicide in 1947 while in custody, according to media at the time, but the other suspects did not face trial for the crime.

The case is just one of a truckload of files that include cover-ups that have been suppressed about war crimes, says Jim Burke, who runs an

organisation finding missing soldiers and who did much of the legwork on the Walklate and Eagleton matter. He says he has seen documents that confirmed body parts from the two prisoners had been served to the Japanese soldiers in a ritual scenario.

But he says, while censorship of such information can make it hard to track down missing soldiers, it still should be respected. "It could be information that is distressing to the relatives and that makes it difficult. In my opinion, that's quite understandable," he says.

An Australian Archives spokesman says under section 33 (1) g, some information relating to personal sensitivities or confidential information is removed from the files. Permission to access the information can be sought. The army's Unrecovered War Casualties unit continues to investigate historical data in a bid to confirm the identity of the remains, after DNA testing was unable to establish a profile.