

# remains of WWII commandos



servicemen killed in 1945. Photo: KARLEEN WILLIAMS.

**T**owards the end of World War II, two captured Australian commandos were led out by their Japanese captors, forced to kneel and then beheaded, their bodies dumped in unmarked graves.

There's now hope that their remains might finally be found where they have lain for the past 64 years on an island off the north coast of Papua New Guinea.

Head of the group Operation Aussies Home Jim Bourke acknowledges that finding them remains an extremely long shot.

"But until you go and have a crack you never know," he said.

"There might be someone who knows where they buried the Australians." His research in the National Archives revealed post-war interrogation reports of captured Japanese personnel plus sketch maps indicating where the men were buried.

From the descriptions, Mr Bourke believes they may be Lance Corporal Alan Walklate, of Bondi in Sydney, and Private Ronald Eagleton, of Sutherland in Sydney, both members of Z Special Unit, and participants in Operation Copper.

This mission, detailed in the book *Guns of Muschu* by author Don Dennis, involved an eight-man patrol landing on the island of Muschu on April 11, 1945, to assess whether a pair of Japanese heavy guns could threaten the upcoming amphibious

## Sketch maps may help locate two victims of the Japanese, MAX BLENKIN reports

landing at Wewak on the mainland. The mission was a disaster.

Three died on the island, most likely captured and executed, while another four disappeared after seeking to paddle on logs to meet an Australian vessel.

The records are unclear but it appears that two of the four made it to nearby Kairiru Island, the base of a substantial Japanese garrison.

A document dated October 7, 1947, located by Mr Bourke, cites interrogation reports in which Japanese personnel describe the killing of two captured Australians about 10 days apart.

In it, Japanese Navy Petty Officer Waichi Oagawa said he was ordered to perform both executions.

"At a spot about 100m away in the direction of headquarters a large Australian airman, blindfolded and wearing Japanese summer clothing was being held with his arms behind his back by a guard detail," he said, describing the first execution.

"He was kneeling on both knees in front of a hole in the ground." On both occasions Petty Officer Oagawa borrowed a sword from the large group of onlookers to perform the execution.

Mr Bourke, whose efforts led to the

recovery of all six Australians missing in the Vietnam War, said a Japanese admiral was sentenced to death for ordering these murders, but committed suicide.

The executioner received a long jail sentence.

He said the records indicated neither body was recovered after the war and the interrogation reports and maps offered some hope that they could be found.

"It is a matter of trying to make sense of the sketch maps that were in those reports. Someone has to go there and have a look," he said.

That could be the Americans.

Don Dennis, whose uncle Sapper Mick Dennis was the Muschu mission's sole survivor, said the Americans looked like mounting a small expedition to Kairiru some time, maybe this year, in a bid to locate airmen lost during World War II.

The US maintains a large and active organisation, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, based in Hawaii, whose mission is to locate all missing US personnel from past conflicts.

A spokesman for the command could not confirm its personnel were

heading for Kairiru. He said the command was still planning missions, which could include the Pacific region, to be conducted later this year.

The impetus to locate the missing men appears to have come from a couple of directions.

Mr Bourke was contacted by Donald Gubbay, brother of Lieutenant Alan Gubbay, one of the four commandos who disappeared at sea, suspecting he might have been one of those who reached Kairiru.

Mr Dennis was contacted by an American investigator.

"He was looking for his father who was shot down near Muschu, probably earlier," he said.

"He came across reports in the American archives about two guys coming ashore on Kairiru.

"One was totally naked. He said he was an Australian soldier. One just had his trousers on and said he was an Australian airman.

"We think they may have been cover stories."

So why has nothing been done for so long?

About 750 Australians remain missing in action from the savage fighting in PNG during World War II.

There was a view soon after the war that the families should be spared the full appalling details.

"People say, 'Well why hasn't that information been brought out.' The point is no one has been looking for it," Mr Bourke said.