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INCURSIONS by Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees have drawn renewed attention to the vulnerability of Australia's northern coastline. Such fears are nothing new. The claim is occasionally made that Japanese aircrews - in addition to the famed bombings of Broome and Darwin - landed in isolated regions of Australia during World War II.

Most accounts have the invaders landing as the result of engine failure, and have been generally dismissed as fanciful.

But there is another story - and it is true. It happened within spitting distance of the Northern Territory coastline, and is almost certainly the only case of an Australian being taken prisoner on Australian domestic territory.

It involves the Rev Leonard Kentish, then the head of the North Australian Department of the Methodist Overseas Missions. On January 22, 1943, Kentish and five Aborigines took a lift in the naval supply boat *Patricia Cam*, which was plying between Elcho Island, off Arnhem Land, the Wessel Islands and Yirrkala Mission.

The boat, which had two officers and 18 seamen on board, was attacked near Elcho by a Japanese seaplane. It sank the craft, then made several passes, shooting at the helpless survivors.

The plane then landed on the water. A commonly accepted account is that Kentish, seemingly disoriented, swam towards it, ignoring or not hearing warning shouts from his companions (he was partially deaf). After a brief conversation the pilot pulled him into the co-pilot's seat and took off.

A key witness, former Sub-Lieutenant John Leggoe, who was with him in the water, says this is incorrect. According to Leggoe: "The plane alighted just outside the circle of wreckage. The rear gunner put a new magazine on his machine gun. He fired a few rounds ... He wanted to finish us off.

"From the forward cockpit one of the crew, wearing a leather flying jacket and a bright green silk scarf, leapt out on the float, beckoned toward us and called for someone to swim over. No-one accepted the invitation.

"The plane taxied around to the opposite side of the circle of survivors where Kentish and I were treading water. Kentish was about 50 yards further out, and when the plane reached him it stopped. The man on the float covered him with a revolver and ordered him to swim over. For a few minutes the man on the float spoke to him and then hauled him up onto the float. He was given something to drink from a flask and bundled into the plane, which took off."

Six crew members and three Aboriginal passengers died. Others were severely wounded. The skipper, Lieutenant A. C. (Sandy) Meldrum, and First Officer Leggoe clung with others to a makeshift raft and after a nightmare journey paddled to a small island from where Meldrum met a group of Aborigines who took him, by canoe, to the larger Marchinbar Island.

The skipper then undertook an agonising 56-kilometre march through inhospitable terrain to Cape Wessel, on the island's northern tip, where a coastwatcher was stationed.

What happened next is disputed. According to Leggoe, the coastwatcher transmitted a coded signal to Darwin, which resulted in a food drop and subsequent rescue[vU1].

Flight Sergeant Len Gairns , the pilot of the plane which found them, says he has no knowledge of any signal, and that the initial spotting was accidental. From a base in Horn Island, in the Torres Strait, he and several colleagues made daily reconnaissance flights westwards along the coast of Dutch New Guinea, south to the islands near Darwin, and home. "We were looking for an invasion fleet. If we found one we were told to send a plain message and expect to be killed immediately."

The long, triangular flights, almost entirely over water, were often tedious, the monotony being broken by sightings of sharks and stingrays. The flight on January 27 turned out to be more than just routine. "We flew over the northern tip of Wessel Island. I saw this bearded white man on the beach, waving furiously. He looked like Moses. He was not a sailor[vU2]; I never learned who he was. He had written a message in the sand, which told us about the Pat Cam. I dropped a message, via a little bag that we carried, and he drew in the sand the direction we should take to look for survivors. This is Johnson & Moffitt[vU3]????

"We headed in that direction, passing other islands, until we found them. I was tempted to break radio silence, but we would have been court martialled. We could break the news only when we returned to base." This is why they were flying south

A Navy craft sailed from Darwin to pick up the survivors.

Gairns, whose contact with them was purely from the air, did not know about the capture of Leonard Kentish. Others, presumably, passed this information to the Horn Island base.

Incredibly, Mrs Violet Kentish, who had been evacuated to Brisbane after the bombing of Darwin, received only skimpy details of her husband's disappearance. She assumed, as did Leggoe and others, that he was a prisoner of war.

In 1945, when her husband didn't return, she became desperate. A year later, having pestered military brass and returned service organisations to no avail, she wrote letters to newspapers, appealing for information. The chief of staff of The West Australian {*this is Malcolm John Leggoe Uren – bloody wierd*) asked one of his reporters to investigate. That man was former SubLieutenant (later Lieutenant) John Leggoe, who said: "I knew that man. We were splashing around together in the water."

Leggoe immediately contacted RAAF Intelligence in Melbourne. He later visited the offices of the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor, H. F. E. Whitlam(father of Gough), and swore an affidavit about the affair.

Meanwhile, on a train in Melbourne, a former RAAF intelligence officer, Alfred Wilson, back in his civilian job with the State Electricity Commission of Victoria, opened his copy of the Argus, and saw an identical letter from Violet Kentish.

Flight Lieutenant Wilson had spent part of the war in Horn Island, and recalled hearing about the missionary's disappearance. (Gairns thinks Wilson might have been the officer to whom he reported at the end of his patrol. The Herald was unable to ascertain what action, if any, Wilson, or his intelligence colleagues, had taken in regard to Kentish.)

After reading the letter in the Argus, Wilson, who had spent the latter war years serving with the Americans, contacted a friend on General Douglas MacArthur's staff in Tokyo. It was discovered that the missionary had been taken to the Japanese-held island of Dobo, in the Aru Islands (now part of Indonesia), where, on February 5, 1943, he had been beheaded.

IT was not the end of the story. Military investigators in Tokyo tracked down the commander of the base at Dobo, former Sub-Lieutenant Sagejima Mangan, who had returned to his civilian occupation as a farmer.

Sagejima, who admitted ordering the killing, was arrested as a war criminal, together with a Japanese rating, Petty Officer Hoyama Kenzo, who had carried out the execution, and the civil administrator at Dobo, Kohama Shozuke.

The trial took place in an Australian military court in Hong Kong. Witnesses referred to the excitement caused at the Dobo base by the arrival of the prisoner, described as a big man wearing only a pair of khaki shorts. His body was covered in thick dark oil and his nose was bleeding.

According to court records, including reports by sympathetic islanders, Kentish was hustled into a small office, Kohama was summoned and a preliminary interrogation began. Without his hearing aid, which had been lost in the sinking of the Patricia Cam, Kentish could hear nothing.

Sagejima was sent for and expressed disappointment at the turn of events. He did not share the pilot's enthusiasm and was annoyed that he should have to find accommodation for his prisoner. Kentish was put in the island's civilian jail, where he spent three days without food. A friendly villager, Kiem Lam, wrapped some rice in a banana leaf and smuggled it to him when the sentry was absent. Kentish scrawled a message in charcoal on the cement wall. Two words - "Leonard" and "missionary" - remained in Lam's memory. They were to lead to Sagejima's arrest and conviction for murder.

During the next few days there were heavy bombing raids by Australian aircraft. Sagejima decided to take vengeance on his prisoner. He sought out Kohama, and suggested that Kentish be executed. Kohama readily agreed and strapped on his sword.

Sagejima called one of his petty officers, Hoyama Kenzo, and led the way to the jail. Kentish was dragged out, marched a couple of hundred metres to an old cemetery and made to kneel beside a bomb crater. Hoyama blindfolded him and Kohama, drawing his sword and passing it to the petty officer, asked that it be used for the execution. On Sagejima's order, Hoyama decapitated the prisoner.

The trial took place on May 21, 1948. All three admitted to killing a European, but claimed it was not Kentish. (The writing on the wall, mentioned by the friendly islander, disproved this argument.) Sagejima also argued that the prisoner was so badly injured there was no hope of his recovery; he could not bear to see him suffer and had killed him out of kindness.

On May 27 the court found all three accused guilty and sentenced them to death by hanging. In the cases of Kohama and Hoyama this was commuted to life imprisonment.

Sagejima was hanged in Stanley Prison, Hong Kong, at 7 am on August 24, 1948. On the scaffold he was asked if he wished to say anything. He uttered the curious reply: "I thank you. Peace and prosperity to the British Empire."

Mrs Violet Kentish, who is 90, still lives in Brisbane. She has given English lessons to Japanese students. People ask her: "Do you hate the Japanese? As a minister's wife why do you think God allowed it to happen?" She replies: "My husband counselled people not to hate, and I have no ill will towards the Japanese people. It is not God who kills or makes wars; it is the greed and selfishness of human beings."

The couple's son, the Rev Noel Kentish, a Uniting Church minister, lectures in religious studies at Perth's Edith Cowan University (formerly the Western Australia College of Advanced Education).

Noel Kentish was eight years old when his father died. He recalls being carried on his father's shoulders on walks through a banana plantation and "Dad reading to me from Brer Rabbit".

Only a few weeks before his father disappeared, Noel, his mother and his sister had been evacuated from Goulburn Island, their official base, to begin the long trek south. The reason was the feared Japanese invasion.

There were other such treks, the most remarkable being an exodus of 101 people (95 children and six adults) mostly from Croker Island. This unique convoy travelled 4,800 kilometres in boats, trucks, on horseback and on foot, from the islands near Darwin, through Arnhem Land, to Oenpelli, Pine Creek, Birdum, Katherine and Alice Springs, then south on the Ghan railway to Adelaide. From there the group travelled east to Albury, on to Sydney and the small NSW South Coast town of Otford, where a children's home would look after them for the duration.

The exodus was organised and led as far as Oenpelli by Leonard Kentish (who then had to turn back). Shortage of food, as well as fear of invasion, prompted the evacuation. The separation of mixed race (ie, part-Aboriginal) children from their parents was in line with government policy of the day. Though well intentioned, it has long been abandoned.

Alfred Wilson, whose intervention led to retribution against the missionary's executioners, died in 1984, in Melbourne. Gairns, who discovered the crew of the Patricia Cam, ended the war as a flight lieutenant. He later had a distinguished public service career.

John Leggoe became a well-known Perth journalist, and subsequently returned to his first love of farming. He wrote a book, *Trying to be Sailors*, about his war experiences. Now 83, he lives in Duncraig, Perth.

Apart from references in Leggoe's book, and a few pages in the late Douglas Lockwood's *Australia's Pearl Harbour, Darwin 1942*, the Leonard Kentish story remains virtually unknown.

His name is on the honour roll at Darwin Memorial Uniting Church and the Coastwatchers' Memorial at Rabaul. His body has been removed from its grave on Dobo and reinterred in the Commonwealth War Graves' cemetery on Ambon. Nearer home, he is listed on a plaque honouring Methodist "martyrs" at the Uniting Church Centre for Ministry, North Parramatta.

Several years ago - the event his family likes best - Aborigines on Goulburn Island named a coconut grove in his honour.