
The Story of the

DISAPPEARANCE

of the

REVEREND

LEN KENTISH

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Cover

Reverend LN Kentish, BA LiTh

...The General Secretary reported that at the request of the Chairman of the District, it had been arranged for Mr Kentish to proceed to Darwin by the March steamer. The Townsville Circuit had graciously agreed to release him in order to meet the urgent need in Darwin...

The Missionary Review, April 5, 1935

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THE STORY OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE REVEREND LEN KENTISH

Reverend Len Kentish was an Australian missionary worker captured by the Japanese in World War Two. His is the only recorded case of a prisoner being taken by the Japanese on Australian soil during the war.

He was in charge of the Methodist Overseas Mission in the Northern Territory and was based in Darwin. He was hitching a ride to Yirrkala on HMAS *Patricia Cam*.

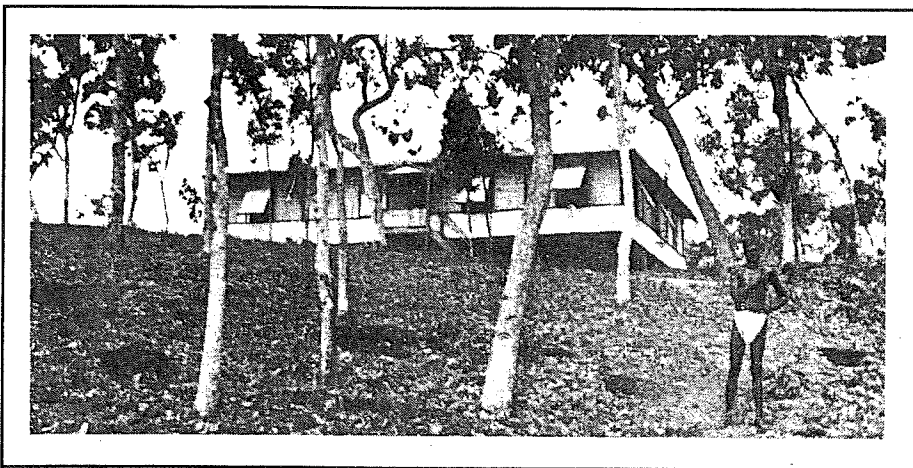
Here are five sources of information about the events surrounding the sinking of the HMAS *Patricia Cam*.

Read them. Complete the learning activities alongside the sources. You should then have a better understanding of what happened on 22 January 1943 to Reverend Kentish and the others aboard.

Source 1

Extract from Obituary by Rev Chaseling, then Missionary at Yirrkala.

...Leonard Noel Kentish was appointed to the North Australia district in 1935 and served there until his capture by the Japanese in January 1943. At that time he was chairman of the district and part-time chaplain. By the favour of the Captain of the patrol-ship H.M.A.S. 'Patricia Cam' he was travelling to the distant Yirrkala mission station when, off the Wessel Islands, a Japanese float plane dived out of the sky and bombed the vessel...From that date the details of his movements are not known; but he was taken to the Aru Islands in April 1943 and held prisoner until May 4th of the same year, when he was executed. The Australian War Graves Unit later recovered and buried his remains at Ambon.



The Mission House at Yirrkala

Source 2

Just after Christmas 1942 Rev Kentish was visiting all the Aboriginal mission stations across the Top End in a Navy supply vessel. The boat had stopped in at Milingimbi delivering food and supplies. At Elcho Island, The Rev Harold Shepherdson went out to the boat and spoke to the Captain...

Rev Harold Shepherdson, then Missionary at Milingimbi, gives his version of events.

Taken from his article 'The Early Years'.

...I was talking to the Captain. [He] had his lights blazing as though he was down south somewhere. I suggested this was not a good idea. But he said that there were no Japanese around here.

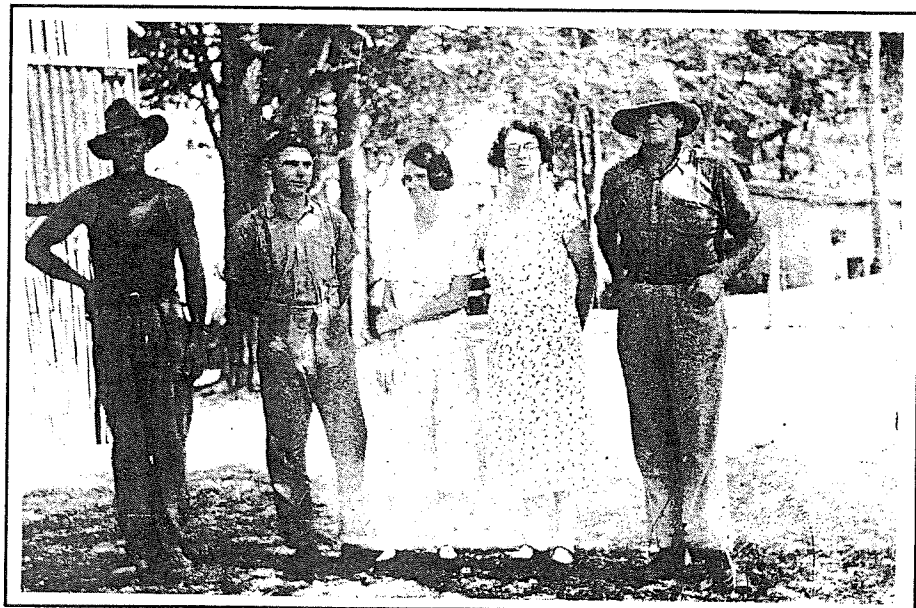
I suggested he go up the straits and keep close to land as he was going to the Wessels, but he didn't listen to me. They left here at midnight and were bombed amidships at 12 o'clock the next day. The boat sank and Kentish and some of the Aborigines fought their way out and came to the surface. Most of the men were in the water at the time. Len was a bit further away from the others collecting debris to float on to get to shore. The Japanese in the sea plane beckoned him to come over, thinking he was the Captain.

They took him at pistol point and that was the last we saw of him.

Only after the end of the war did we find out he was beheaded for no reason whatsoever. It was about a week after the bombing when we knew what had happened. One man made his way to Cape Wessel where there was a coast watcher but his code words and ours were different so we could not work out what had happened, though we guessed...

Does Shepherdson know this is why the Japanese captured Kentish?

Compare this account with the historical account by Alan Powell. Why do you think a historian writing in the 1990s seems to tell us more about the events than the people who lived through them?



Staff at Milingimbi Mission. From right: Reverend T Theodore Webb, Mrs Webb, Mr and Mrs Shepherdson, Mr Kentish.

Events as recalled by Bapulu Yunupingu, Djurranalpi Homeland, Elcho Island.

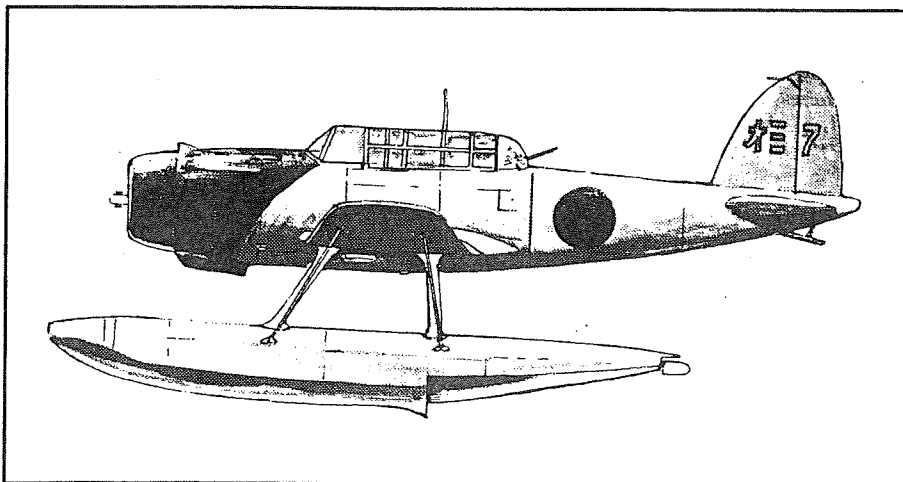
(Translated from Gumatj language by Jenny Wulumdhuna and Ian McIntosh, 1991)

I was about ten years old and living at Milingimbi when the war started. The Missionary Harold Shepherdson had told all the Aborigines to go back to their homelands and wait there until the war was over. He said it was safer in the homelands as we could hide in the jungle or in caves if the bombing started. My father Dutarrk, my mother and I boarded the mission boat *Larrpan* ... The boat let us all off at Dambaliya (Alger Island) in the Wessels where we met up with Warramirri people who were on their way to Yirmga (Drysdale Island). We sailed up to the northern Wessel Island, Martjinbar, by dugout canoe and camped at Darrakangur, on the west coast. It was 1942 and there were no people living on the Island at the time. After that we moved north to Djalambungur/Gurrumu.

Not too long after this, two mission boats, the *Southern Cross* and the *Kuru* arrived at our new camp. The boats brought with them the coastwatcher, Jack Jensen. With him also was Mattjuwi, Warramirri man, who explained to us that Jensen was on the lookout for Japanese and had been sent to protect us. Jensen set up his camp in the rainforest so it could not be seen from the sea or air.

He stored his weapons and ammunition in caves at Gulindingur, on the rocky eastern coast. He told us to stay close to his camp and not to make any fires in the night time, and not to fight with one another. He could speak fluently in the Golpa language. They call this camp Jensen Bay today.

Jensen was like a cowboy. Three times we heard the Japanese planes come over and Jensen was ready for them because he could hear them talking on the radio. By himself he shot the planes down. He had a telescope, a rifle and revolver. He never missed. Those Japanese must have been planning something for this area because it was just after this third plane was shot down that the ship carrying the Rev Kentish was destroyed twenty miles [thirty-two kilometres] south of our camp at a place called Gurakangur.

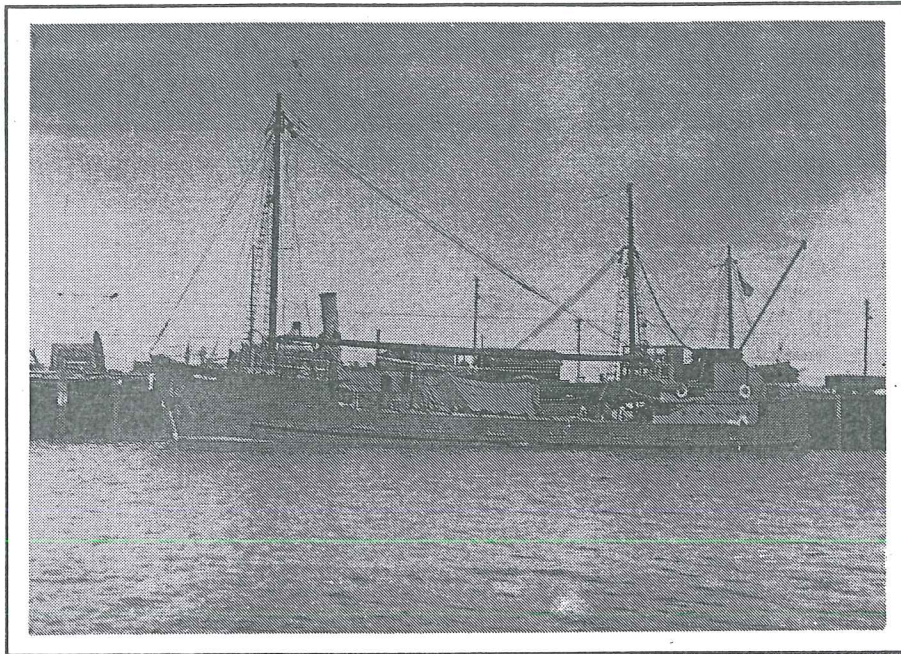


Japanese floatplane

Why does Bapulu Yunupingu think the ship was attacked?

How does Bapulu Yunupingu know what happened when the Patricia Cam was attacked?

...All, except for the first mate, had major injuries. The Japanese sea plane flew over shooting at the men swimming in the water. It was then that Kentish was taken prisoner. He saved the Aborigines and the crew members from a certain death. He said to the Japanese, 'Take me, leave the others!' When the survivors reached the shore, they were met by a party of Galpu men... who did not know the war was on. They took the first mate to the camp at Jensen Bay, an overland trip of two days. Jensen fed all the men and arranged for an air-drop of blankets, tents and food to the place where the injured men lay. They were later transported to Milingimbi and then Darwin. Narratjin, a surviving member of the crew, was transported by canoe to Yirrkala hospital...



HMAS Patricia Cam

Extract from *Mission to ARNHEM LAND* by Maisie McKenzie, Chapter Twenty, 1976.

THE REVEREND LEN KENTISH

...The boat sailed at midnight. Twelve hours later the *Patricia Cam*, with Len Kentish on board, was bombed by a Japanese plane. It was a direct hit. They were about five miles [8 km] from the Wessels and forty [64 km] from Elcho. There was no warning: the enemy plane had cut off its engines and dived down straight in front of the sun, taking everyone by surprise. The bomb went through the hatch and blew out the flat bottom of the boat. She sank within ninety seconds.

Some of the crew were killed instantly while others were badly shocked and severely injured. They struggled in the water, looking for debris to keep them afloat.

The plane, an amphibian, circled around the survivors and then, only two minutes after sinking of the vessel, dropped another bomb. This went well down into the sea before it exploded, throwing up a mushroom of water. The thudding concussion resounded in the eardrums of the already shocked men. More were killed, including three or four Yirrakala men who had been aboard the *Patricia Cam*.

The aircraft then circled around for about half an hour, machine-gunning the survivors. Most of them managed to escape further injury by diving under the water, and a grazed head and a leg wound were the only casualties. After this nerve-racking thirty minutes the plane flew off out of sight. The men thought it had gone, but in five minutes it was back again. This time it landed on the water and a Japanese airman, wearing a leather flying-suit with a green scarf and a helmet, climbed out of the front cockpit and walked along the wing. Brandishing a Mauser-type pistol, he gave directions to the taxiing plane until it stopped near a man in the water. It was Len Kentish. He had been somewhat apart from the others, looking for debris. The airman beckoned him over to the plane, and while he rested on the float the Japanese spoke to him, covering him with his pistol. He then ordered the missionary to get up into the plane. He was shown into the cockpit and given something to drink from a flask.

The airman climbed in and the low-winged monoplane took off, disappearing into the tropical haze. Thus Len Kentish became the first prisoner-of-war to be taken in Australian waters. The irony of the situation was that he was more or less an innocent bystander, a civilian missionary who had such a soft spot for the Japanese in Darwin that he conducted English lessons for them.

After the plane had gone the survivors tried to organise themselves. Those who could still move about got their injured companions onto a raft that had blown free of the vessel, and the others clung to improvised floats. They tried to reach the Wessel Islands, but after paddling and swimming for four hours they had made little progress. At nightfall, they caught a strong current and were carried southwards, landing on a small rocky islet off the Wessels. They had been in the water for fifteen hours.

At daybreak they were found by Aborigines who led them to fresh water and collected edible roots for them. The commander of the *Patricia Cam* then set off with the Aborigines in a canoe to the Wessels. He walked thirty-five miles [56 km] in bare feet and eventually, with his Aboriginal companions, he reached the mainland. On the fifth day after the sinking an aircraft dropped food and supplies to the other survivors. They were picked up on the seventh day.

No news whatever was heard of Len Kentish, and it was not until after the war, three years later, that his wife could get any information at all. She had written letters to all major Australian newspapers seeking information, and in an extraordinary coincidence a response came from a Western Australian journalist, John Leggoe, who had been an R.A.N.V.R. lieutenant on the *Patricia Cam* when it sank. He set up immediate enquiries. At the same time an R.A.A.F. squadron leader, who had been involved in the rescue of survivors from the *Patricia Cam* at Horn Island, also read Vi Kentish's letter; and he, too, set about trying to find out what happened to Len.

Was it inevitable that we
should find out what
happened to Rev Len
Kentish?

The news, when it finally came through, was shattering. Len Kentish had been taken to the Aru Islands as a prisoner in April 1943. On 4 May he was beheaded. The tragedy of his death was one that was felt deeply right through the Methodist Church and far beyond it.

In August 1948 the man responsible for the execution, Lieutenant Sagejima Mangan, was himself hanged for the crime in Stanley Gaol, Hong Kong. But that did nothing to restore a brave man whom Sheppy described as "one of the finest ... who ever lived;" a man who gave himself devotedly and wholeheartedly to the task of serving God and the Church.

The day after the *Patricia Cam* was sunk, Japanese planes circled Goulburn Island and machine-gunned the mission station. Fortunately nobody was injured . . .

Source 5

Extract from *The Shadow's Edge* by historian, Alan Powell, 1988

. . . For the Royal Australian Navy, service in north Australian waters after the early months of the Japanese war became, as did the army's role on shore, more a matter of providing support services than of direct operations against the enemy.

Once through Torres Strait, shipping from south-eastern ports for Darwin was safe from underwater attack; but a new menace grew up once the enemy had occupied the Aru Island—floatplanes, based at Taberfane and Dobo. They hampered the east coast supply route and caused losses until 1944.

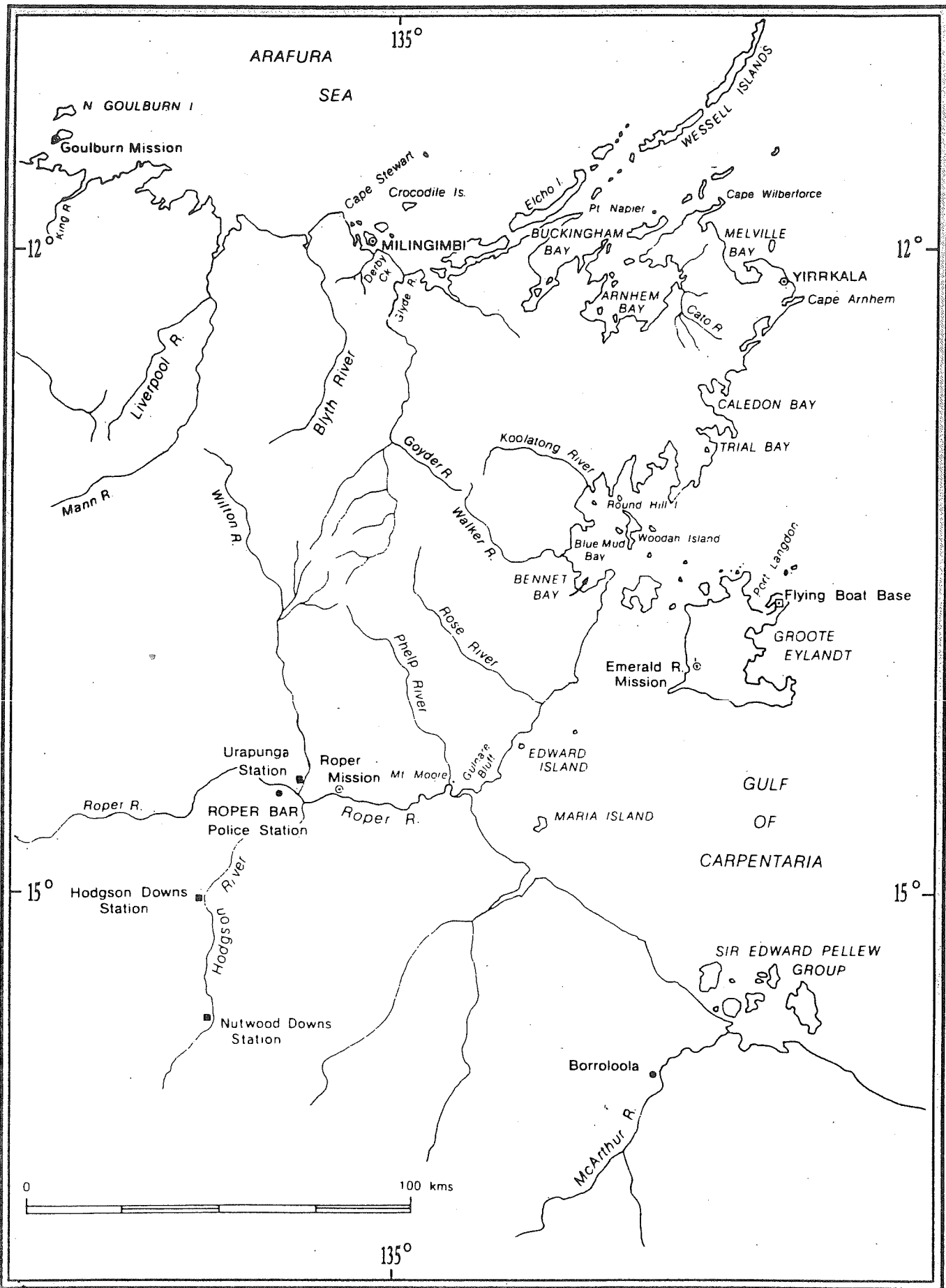
On 22 January 1943, a floatplane sank the 300-tonne coastal supply vessel H.M.A.S. *Patricia Cam* in the Wessel Islands. She was *en route* from the Elcho Island mission to a coastwatching post in the Wessel Islands carrying stores, a crew of nineteen including, temporarily, John Leggoe as First Lieutenant, five Aborigines and a Methodist missionary, the Reverend Len Kentish. 'Floatplane Joe', in Leggoe's terminology, came out of the early afternoon sun with engine cut off, took *Patricia Cam*'s crew completely by surprise and dropped a bomb squarely on the central cargo hatch. One crewman went down with the ship. 'Floatplane Joe' strafed the survivors in the water for half an hour, fatally injuring two more crewmen and three of the Aborigines. Then the aircraft landed near the survivors. As Leggoe recalled:

'From the forward cockpit one of the crew, wearing a leather flying jacket and a bright green silk scarf, leapt out on to the float beckoning towards us and called for someone to swim over. No one accepted the invitation. The plane taxied around to . . . where Kentish and I were treading water.

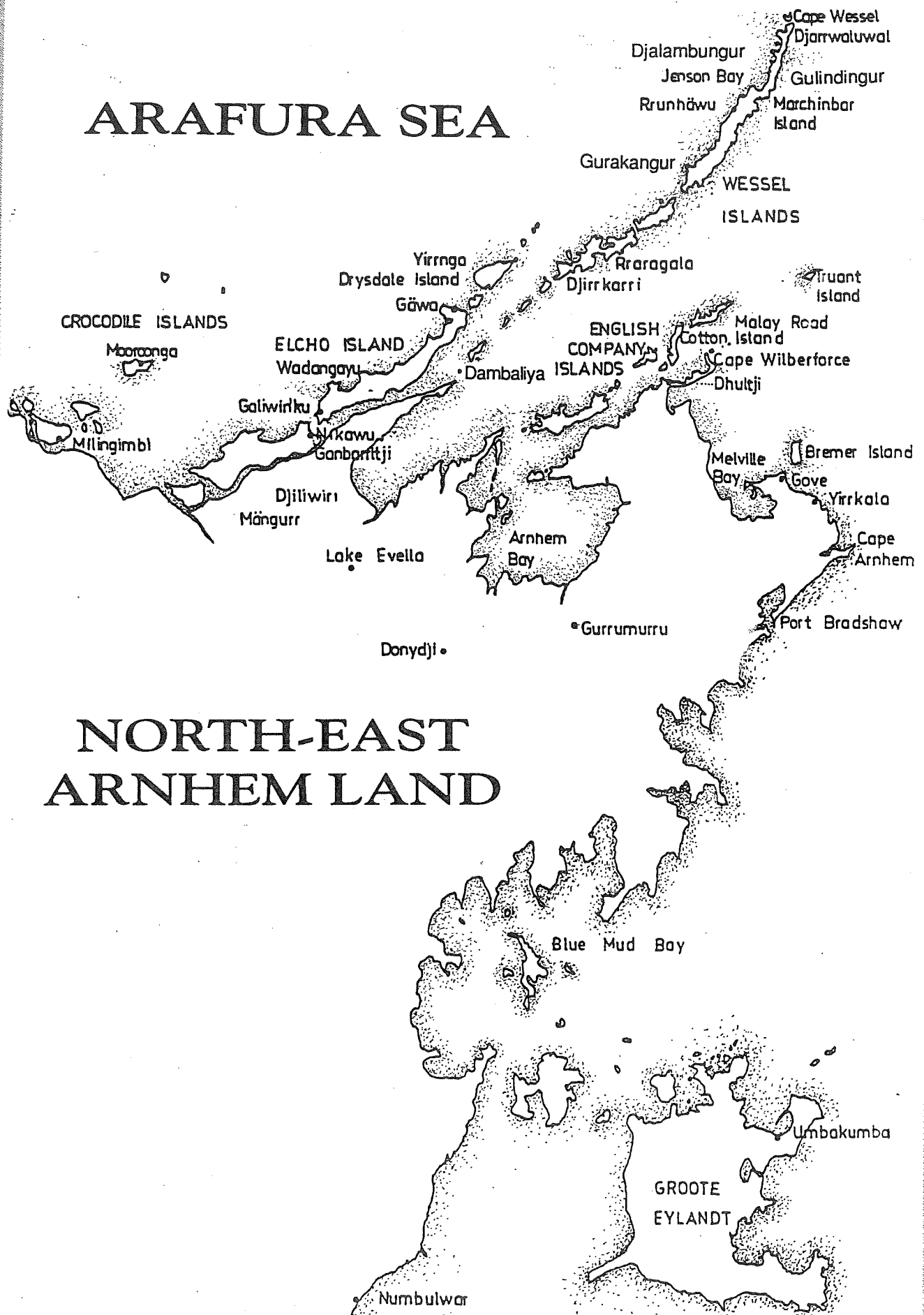
Kentish was about fifty yards [55 m] further out and when the plane reached him it was stopped, he was covered with a revolver and ordered to swim over. For a few minutes the man on the float spoke to him and then hauled him up . . . He was given something to drink from a flask and bundled into the plane, which took off and disappeared to the north . . . I saw Kentish go with mixed feelings. He would be a prisoner of the Japanese for the remainder of the war but at least he was alive. Our chances of survival just then looked extremely doubtful.'

The fortunes of war decided differently. All but two of the remaining crew drifted ashore in the Wessel Islands the next morning and, after a hard march by the ship's captain, Lieutenant A. C. Meldrum, and local Aborigines to the coastwatching station, they were rescued by Kuru and returned to Darwin. 'Floatplane Joe' took Kentish to Dobo where he was imprisoned, severely bashed and interrogated under control of Japanese navy Lieutenant Sagejima Mangan. Early in February, 18 Squadron B25 bombers and 31 Squadron Beaufighters, flying from the Darwin area, retaliated for the floatplane attacks by striking so heavily at Dobo that the floatplane detachment had to be temporarily withdrawn; with tragic results for Kentish, because Sagejima, angered by the destruction, decided to execute his prisoner. On the evening of 5 February 1943, he, Petty Officer Hoyama Kenzo and a civilian attaché, Kohama Shozuke, took Len Kentish to the Japanese cemetery at the rear of Dobo gaol. Hoyama blindfolded him. He was made to kneel beside a bomb crater and, with the sword offered by Kohama, Hoyama beheaded him. For more than two and a half years, no outsider knew of this fate; but the Aru Island villagers remembered and the three Japanese were brought to trial at Hong Kong in 1948. All were found guilty and sentenced to death. Sagejima was hanged; the other two had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment . . .

Why do you think John Leggoe is not mentioned in the account of events from the missionary Shepherdson and Bapula Yunupingu?



ARAFURA SEA



NORTH-EAST ARNHEM LAND



Things to do

Discuss the questions raised beside each source.

Use all the sources and the maps to make a 'story map' which illustrates the events which happened. Make sure you include events which

- all sources talk about/agree on
- are mentioned in only some of the sources
- are described in conflicting ways in the sources.

These story maps can be displayed in your class or community.

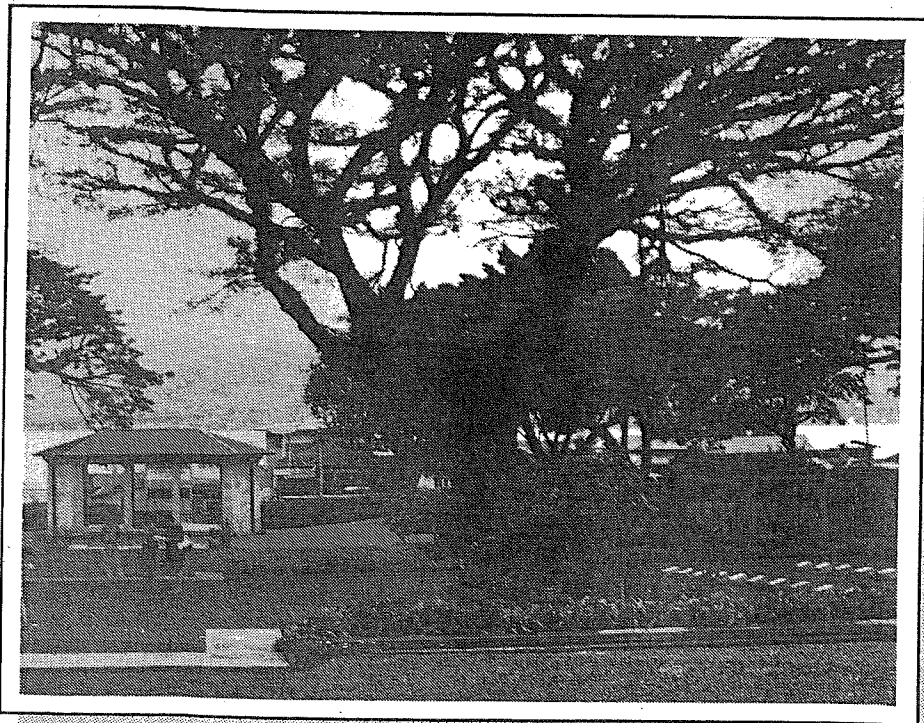
Create a title for your story maps.

List all the reasons for the attack on the *Patricia Cam* using all sources. Discuss the most likely explanation for the attack.

Discuss the limitations of eye-witness accounts, stories handed down and written histories as sources of evidence about what happened in the past.

Using *The Story of the Disappearance of the Reverend Len Kentish* as the model, investigate other incidences reported during the years surrounding the bombing of Darwin i.e.

- the report from Bathurst Island of the approach of Japanese aircraft which was ignored by the Australian authorities
- the capture of Japanese airmen by local Aborigines
- the alleged misconduct of the Administrator Mr CLA Abbott.



Australian War Cemetery, Ambon, Indonesia - gravesite of Rev Len Kentish