

WHEN THE WAR HIT HOME

The capture of an Australian in Australia by the Japanese? It couldn't have happened? Well, it did. Fifty years on, **ALAN GILL** investigates a tragic and little-known incident of World War II.

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



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

asked one of his reporters to investigate. That man was former Sub-Lieutenant (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.



Left: Leonard Kentish, who was captured and killed by the Japanese. Top: His wife, Mrs Violet Kentish, who is now 90. Below left, Len Gairns, and right, John Leggoe.

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.

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

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; 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.

"We headed in that direction, passing other islands, until we found them. I was tempted to break radio silence, but we would have

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

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 *Ber Rabbis*".

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,



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