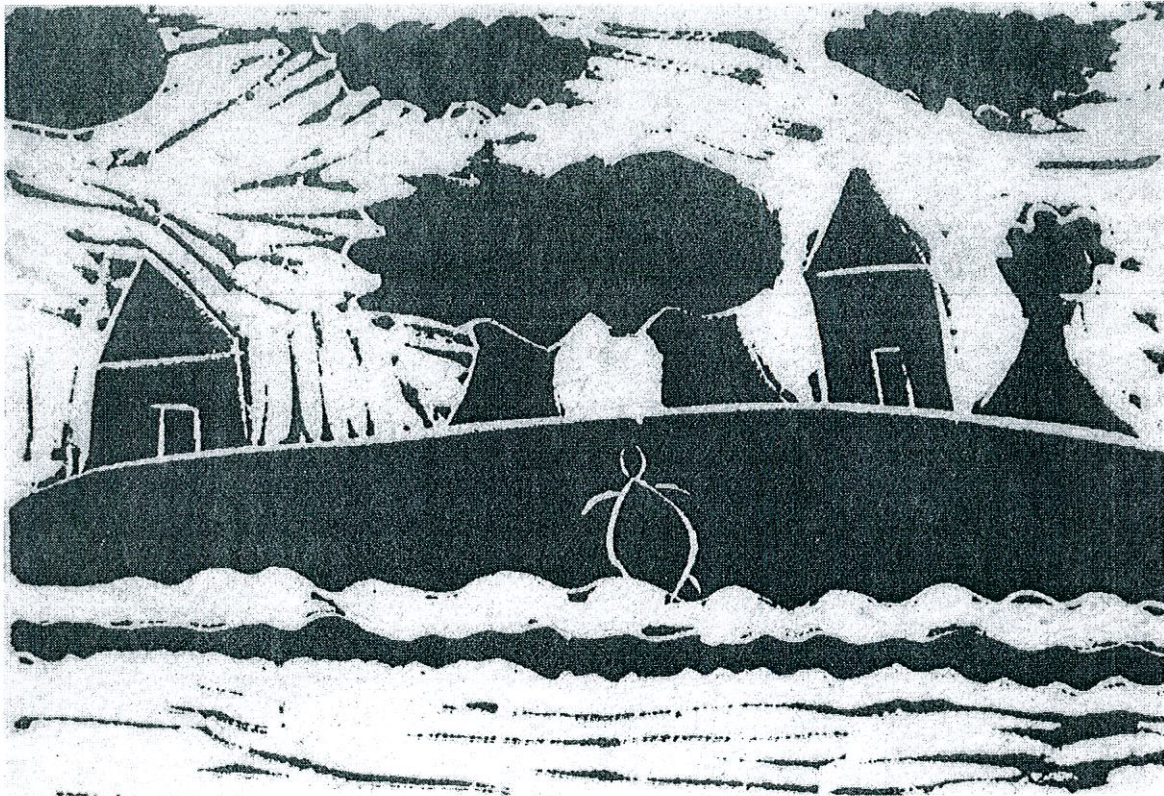


MILINGIMBI HISTORICAL SOCIETY



HAROLD SHEPHERDSON - MAN WITH A MISSION

Introductory Pamphlet

AVIATION HISTORY - REV. LEN KENTISH - RADIO - DOC. FENTON

January 2001

Brief History of Air Force Operations from Milingimbi

Background The first major aviation involvement at Milingimbi was not, as was the usual tendency, the landing of an aeroplane ~ it was the building of one.

Harold Shepherdson, the man who installed and operated the first radio transceiver in Arnhem Land in September 1931, set his able hands to obtaining an aircraft to traverse the impossible country near his Methodist mission. 'Sheppy', as he became known, obtained a Heath 'Parasol' aircraft construction kit, and using the area under the manse, completed construction of the first aircraft built in the N.T. The 'Parasol' was flown from the roadway at the Mission in 1933.

In May 1937, Mrs Chasling, the wife of the missionary at Yirrkala was stranded at Darwin due to the failure of her water transport, and permission was given for her and her child to travel in an RAAF 'Seagull' amphibious plane from Darwin. Refuelling requirements made an en route stopover necessary at Milingimbi and this occurrence foreshadowed the development of Milingimbi as an important RAAF base during World War Two.

Development As with many other sites in coastal NW; Australia, Milingimbi was selected to become an Advance Operational Base when defence plans were initiated in 1939. RAAF 'No 1 Mobile Works Squadron carried out the first major airbase construction in August 1942, and in accordance with the 'Moultrie' Plan of March 1943 for the defence of Australia, No 59 Operational Base Unit was established at Milingimbi on 12 April 1943. Base facilities were the barest essentials for refuelling the aircraft, with no ground radio or servicing facilities.

Also in April 1943, No 308 Radar Squadron was established at Milingimbi away from the airstrip. This station provided early warning detection capability, against incoming enemy aircraft. Most of the military personnel on the island were engaged on tasks associated with this facility. Later in August 1943, No 9 Zone Filter Centre was established in association with the radar unit to provide information for fighter aircraft reactions to enemy attacks.

Japanese Attacks

War came to Milingimbi at 11.10am on 9 May 1943, when seven Japanese 'Sally' bombers dropped their 'daisy cutter bombs and strafed the base and the mission. Direct hits were made on the Mission, Church and the dispensary. Houses and other buildings were also damaged. An aboriginal named Gulmata, one soldier and a number of Air Force personal were killed during the raid.

Six **Spitfire** fighters of the RAAF's No 457 Squadron were immediately deployed from their base at Livingstone, near Darwin, to provide air defence against further attacks on Milingimbi. At 9.30am on 10 May 1943 Japanese 'Zero' fighters and floatplane bombers attacked Milingimbi but were intercepted by the Spitfires. Although four of the attackers were destroyed, a stores vessel, the 'Marouba' was sunk, and a Beaufighter' of the RAAF's No 31 Squadron was destroyed, while another was damaged on the ground. One 'Spitfire' was shot down, although its pilot, Flight Lieutenant B, Little, survived. Another Japanese attack of eight bombers and five 'Zero' fighters was launched against Milingimbi on 28 May 1943. Three Japanese bombers were destroyed, but two 'Spitfires' (BR 493 and AR 526) and their crew were lost, with another 'Spitfire' badly damaged. Then on 10 August 1943, Spitfires of No 152 (RAF) Squadron intercepted a number of Japanese planes over the sea from Milingimbi, destroying one of the enemy aircraft and damaging another. The 'Spitfires' suffered no damage or loss.

Air Force Operations

Milingimbi was used by the RAAF as a staging and refuelling base for RAAF aircraft operating against the Japanese. Shipping patrols and bombing missions frequently saw many types of aircraft use the base facilities at Milingimbi. Other aircraft also used the available facilities. It was the usefulness of the base that attracted the Japanese bombing raids.

RAAF No 12 Squadron In 1941, 'Wirraway' aircraft conducted training missions from Darwin to Milingimbi. By 1942 the squadron had also acquired Vultee Vengeance aircraft, and these were utilised in anti-submarine and shipping patrols, with some sorties being mounted from Milingimbi.

RAAF Nos. 2 and 13 Squadrons Lockheed 'Hudsons' of No 13 Squadron visited Milingimbi from Darwin in 1940, and conducted operations from the base throughout 1941. Bombing missions were also flown against targets in Dutch New Guinea, whilst other 'Hudsons' flew reconnaissance and surveillance patrols. The first incident involving Milingimbi occurred on 20 April 1943 when two 'Hudsons' (A16-183 and A 16-197) of No 2 Squadron collided in mid-air over Rapuma Island, having just taken off from Milingimbi to bomb Timuka in Dutch New Guinea. All personnel were killed. Other 'Hudson' losses associated with Milingimbi include:

a. A16-241, on 28 April 1943 was returning to Milingimbi from an armed reconnaissance mission over the sea and disappeared without trace.

b. A16-181 on 15 August 1943) departed Milingimbi to bomb targets in New Guinea and disappeared without trace.

c. A16-178 on 16 October 1943 left Milingimbi on a shipping reconnaissance flight and never returned.

RAAF, No 31 Squadron 'Beaufighters' of 31 Squadron based at Coomalie Creek also used Milingimbi to attack Japanese targets, especially the floatplane base at Taberfane as they presented a threat to shipping. In one of the retaliation raids on Milingimbi, on 10th May 1943 for these attacks, the Japanese destroyed Beaufighter A19-72 on the ground. Another was also damaged. Attacks on Japanese positions continued throughout 1943. On 17th September 1943, three Beaufighters made a forced landing at Milingimbi, two were destroyed. On 25 September 1943 a Beaufighter crashed on take-off from the base. Then in September 1944, two more Beaufighters were lost in bad weather on a flight from Milingimbi to Darwin, following bombing attacks against the Japanese.

Spitfires As the Japanese bombing raids on Milingimbi occurred, Spitfire fighters of No 457 (RAAF), No 54 (RAF), and No 452 (RAF) Squadrons based in Darwin were deployed to provide protection for the base. Some aircraft were lost during engagements with the Japanese attackers, but there were also a number of successes on 10th and 28th May and 10th August 1943.

General During the use of Milingimbi by the Air Force until February 1945, the supply of fresh meat, vegetables and other foodstuffs, for Air Force and mission residents was maintained by the RAAF's No 6 Communications Flight from Darwin. The Unit, commanded by the former Flying Doctor pilot Squadron Leader Clyde Fenton, operated unarmed transport aircraft into Milingimbi for the duration of wartime activities in the area.

Bruce Little,
9 Arana Street,
MANLY VALE, N.S.W. 2093.

From: Intelligence Officer, No. 457 Squadron, LIVINGSTONE.
To: Intelligence Officer, North Western area.
Intelligence Officer, No. 1 Fighter Wing.
Date: 11th May, 1943.

PULL COMBAT REPORT OF P/O B. LITTLE, HILLINGOMBI RAID NO. 2.

1/6/43
From joining of combat. See page 1 first rough combat and composite report of P/O Little, 10.5.43.

When I saw the Zero on the tail of a spitfire I followed (altitude now roughly 9000 feet). My speed 200 IAS. The attacked spitfire was climbing slightly. My position was then about four hundred feet above and to the port of the two aircraft. I dived and pulled up under the Zero's tail, firing mg from 300 yards, closing to 100 yards, with a one second burst. The cannons did not fire, possible due to the shortness of the burst.

The Zero pulled up in a steep climbing turn to port, and I pulled up after him into a position wherein I could see the top of his fuselage. Distance was now roughly 200 yards. I fired a five second burst of cannon and machine gun, and saw strikes on the e/a starboard mainplane.

While firing I felt explosive cannon hit my tail. Altitude now about 9500 feet. I pulled violently away to port, looked around, and saw a Zero firing from roughly 200 yards from port quarter to line astern.

I dived away after turning to port and found that I had to use both hands on the control column to maintain the dive (later found trim shot up). I decided, because of the damage, to return to base, my position now being approximately 10 miles from HILLINGOMBI airfield. (altitude now 5000 feet).

I returned to the airfield, circled at about 1000 feet, landed, and was rolling along the east-west runway from the West when I saw three Zeros in a vic strafing from 50-100 feet along the north-south runway.

Opening my throttle through the gate and taking off I climbed to approximately 2000 feet to port over the NE coast of the island, where I jettisoned my thirty gallon belly tank.

Meanwhile the three Zeros had turned and were making a line astern strafing run along the strip from north to south.

I was still turning and was able to close in behind the third and last Zero, closing in to 500 yards, whence I commenced firing. (Altitude now about 100 feet). Closing fire was roughly 300 yards, after a five second burst. My cannon then ceased firing, possibly due to expiration of ammunition. During this encounter I saw that the Zero was carrying its belly tank. I saw no strikes during this burst.

By this time the Zeros had reached the end of the airfield, and were turning to port, the first two aircraft flying out of vision at approximately 300 feet altitude. I kept flying straight on at almost zero feet, and the Zero which I attacked completed its turn to port and came back onto my tail.

A dog fight ~~the~~ ensued. This consisted of a series of steep and sometimes vertical turns and dives down to about 100 feet, lasting approximately 10 minutes at speeds ranging between 100 and 200 IAS.

The Zero was firing continually during these manoeuvres, and his fire appeared to pass behind me.

The position of this ~~section~~^{section} was mainly south of the airfield and over the coast, verging at times towards the ~~inland~~ mainland and back to the island.

The e/a's tactics were to climb up to 3/500 feet, turn, and attempt to dive onto my tail. I was able to watch him and turn sharply towards him but this necessitated such a degree of turn that the aircraft would shudder violently and almost stall. These manoeuvres were repeated over and over again, ~~while I was able to maintain a steady course~~ while completing one steep turn very close to the ground, I turned my head away from the Zero and found myself heading for the ground. I attempted to flatten out, and struck the ground with the under-nose of the machine at a speed of roughly 150 mph.

The machine somersaulted, turned and rolled three or four times. I retained consciousness throughout, and when the machine came to rest I was lying on my left side in the wreckage, and could hear the Zero circling me.

When the sound of his motor faded, I released the harness and parachute, which were unbroken, and forced my way through the hood, which was jammed half open.

The position of the aircraft was approximately 3 miles SSW of the airfield, on open land, and when I inspected the damage I found that both wings were ripped off, the airscrew was missing, the entire tail unit was gone, and the engine cowling torn off.

I walked back through dense bush to the airfield.

Description of Enemy Aircraft.

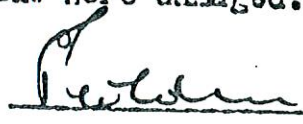
Zero: light bronze camouflage, no distinguishable markings.
Saw no tracer.

Tactics.

As described above. I felt I was holding my own with the Zero, but owing to the intensity of the engagement and this damage, I was becoming tired, and the Zero was getting onto my tail towards the end of the engagement.

I was told when I returned to the airfield that my opponent passed over the airfield with a weak motor and was losing height. Soon after it disappeared from sight a crash or explosion was heard from that direction.

Pilot's Claims. On evidence of ground staff: one Zero destroyed.
During first engagement: one Zero damaged.


Holden P/O
Royal Air Force.

Leonard Noel KENTISH

5th child of Cecil Wallace and Alice Flora KENTISH

Born 4 August 1907 in Melbourne, Victoria*Died* 4 May 1943, Dubo, Arue Kep Islands (now part of Indonesia)*Married* Violet May SIMPSON*Children*

Noel Jackson, Elaine, Judith

Leonard was only a boy of 2 when his parents took their family to *The Gums* in the western parts of Queensland. It was here that he attended The Gums State School. The Rev. Professor H H Trigge described Len as one of the finest souls who came from *The Gums*. Later Len studied at Kings (University) College.

His family's strong religious background was very much to the fore in forging his future. He came a Methodist Minister in Darwin. He was very much liked in Darwin and he had a number of Presbyterians in his congregation. Whilst in Darwin, he proposed the building of a club through the Australian Inland Mission. The large number of men and women from the more southern regions of Australia who were working in Darwin, often their first time from home, had very little suitable entertainment. The Interchurch Club was eventually built, after effective if not a little premature planning.



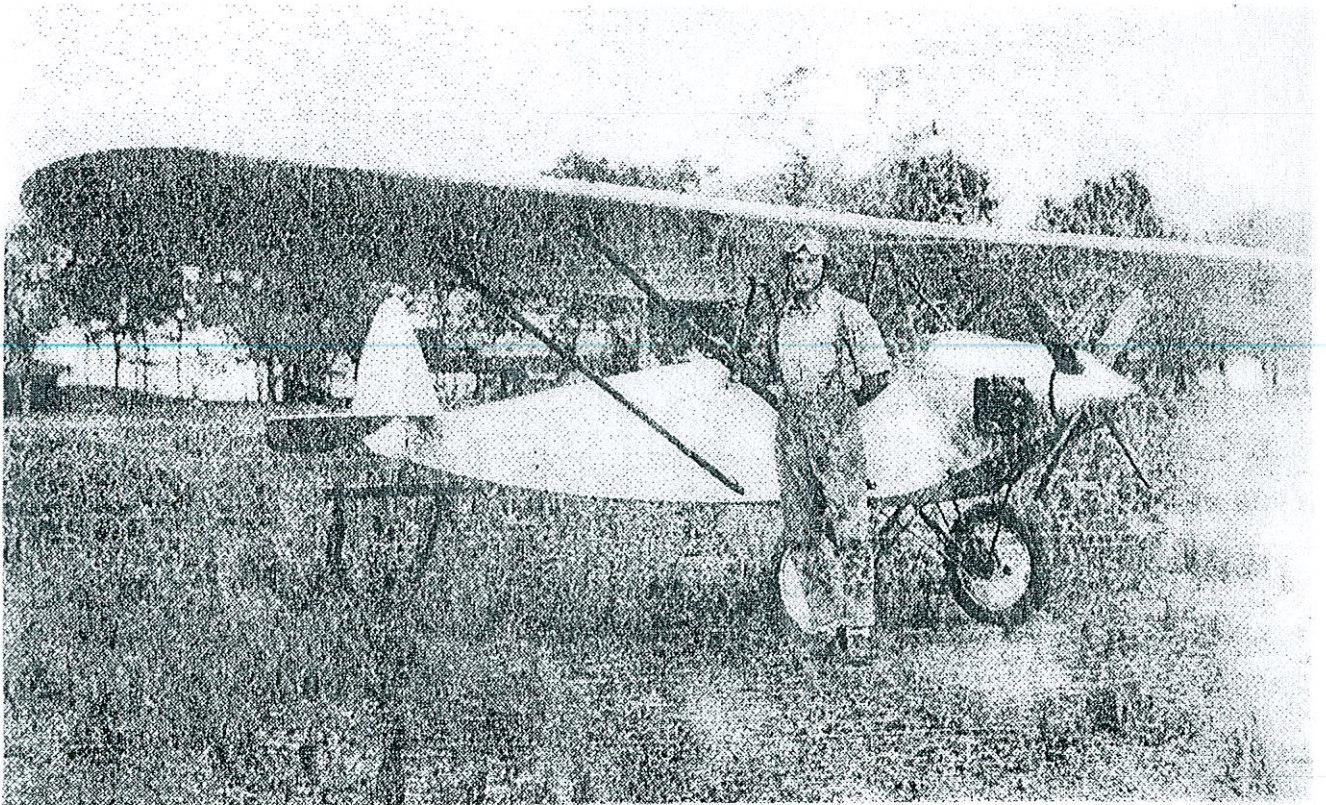
REV. LEONARD NOEL KENTISH
(LEFT)

During the years of the war with Japan, Len was a Methodist Minister with the Australian Inland Mission. A recommendation was given in December 1941 that the island missions be evacuated. In early April 1942 there were still over 90 on Coker Island where Len was stationed. A sea voyage to Darwin was not possible due to the presence of Japanese submarines. The party, including 96 children, set off on a trek of courage. The food supply was a large problem, finding sufficient for 3 meals each day was difficult. On 7 April 1942 they landed on the Arnhem Land Coast. At Oenpelli, the children were hungry and there was a desperate need for food. Here Len broke into the locked Anglican Mission to obtain food. From here, they began their overland trip to Pine Creek. They were assisted by only one truck which was used for supplies. Most of the children walked with some of the lucky ones being carried by mission horses. Len left the party at Nourslargie where government lorries were waiting. None of the party were to see Len again.

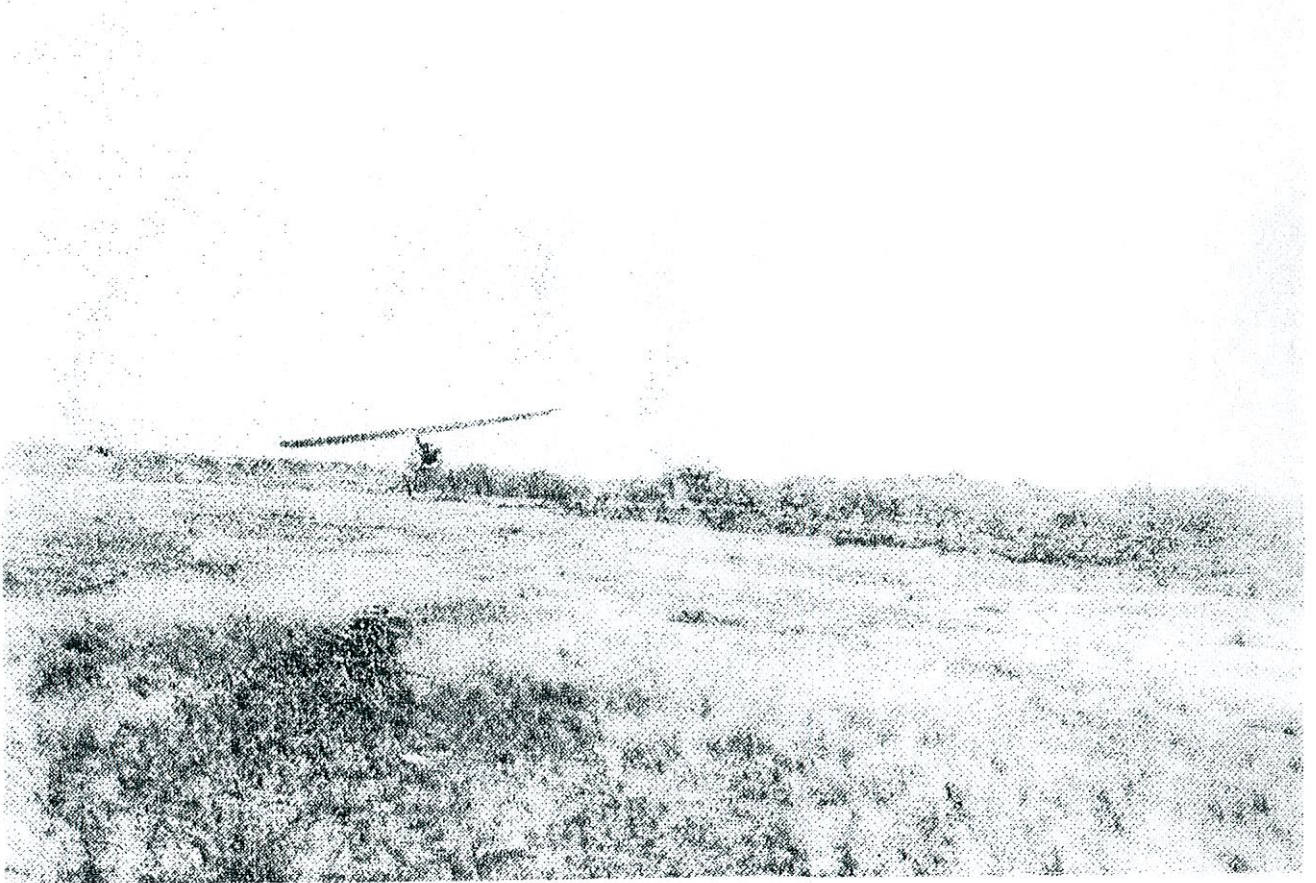
In January 1943 Len was on Milingimbi Mission when the small supply vessel *Patricia Cam* called. It was here that Len and 5 aborigines embarked on a voyage to Yirrkala Mission at the north eastern tip of Arnhem Land. On 22 January a Japanese sea plane came out of the sun attacking the boat. A bomb went through an empty hatch blowing out the bottom of the boat, destroying both lifeboats and killing a seaman. The vessel sunk in less than 1 minute. The crew and passengers found themselves in the sea, only a few hundred metres from the Australian coast. The sea plane returned releasing another bomb resulting in the death of 3 aboriginals and 3 sailors. It appeared as if the plane was leaving when it suddenly returned and landed near the survivors. The 3 air crew with pistols drawn seemed intent on taking a prisoner. This was to be Len who swam to the plane and was hauled aboard without resisting. At the time, Len was Chairman of the Northern Australian District of Methodist Overseas Missions. He was the first Australian prisoner of war the Japanese took in Australian territory. The plane took off and it was eventually learnt that it landed at Dubo in the Aru Kep Islands. It was here that Len was executed by being beheaded. The commander of the Dubo base, Sagejima Mangan, admitted giving the order of the execution. He, along with the actual executioner and the Dubo civil administrator, were arrested as war criminals. They stood trial at the Australian Military Court in Hong Kong. On 23 August 1948, Mangan hanged at Stanley Gaol. The other 2 were found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Len's wife, Violet, had been evacuated earlier with her young children, and was in Brisbane. During the war years, she had no way of ascertaining what had happened to her husband. When the prisoners of war returned, she wrote to the newspapers in every capital seeking information about him, and thus learned of his fate. As Len was not in the services, she was not entitled to a pension but a campaign by *The Brisbane Truth* eventually obtained justice for her and her family.

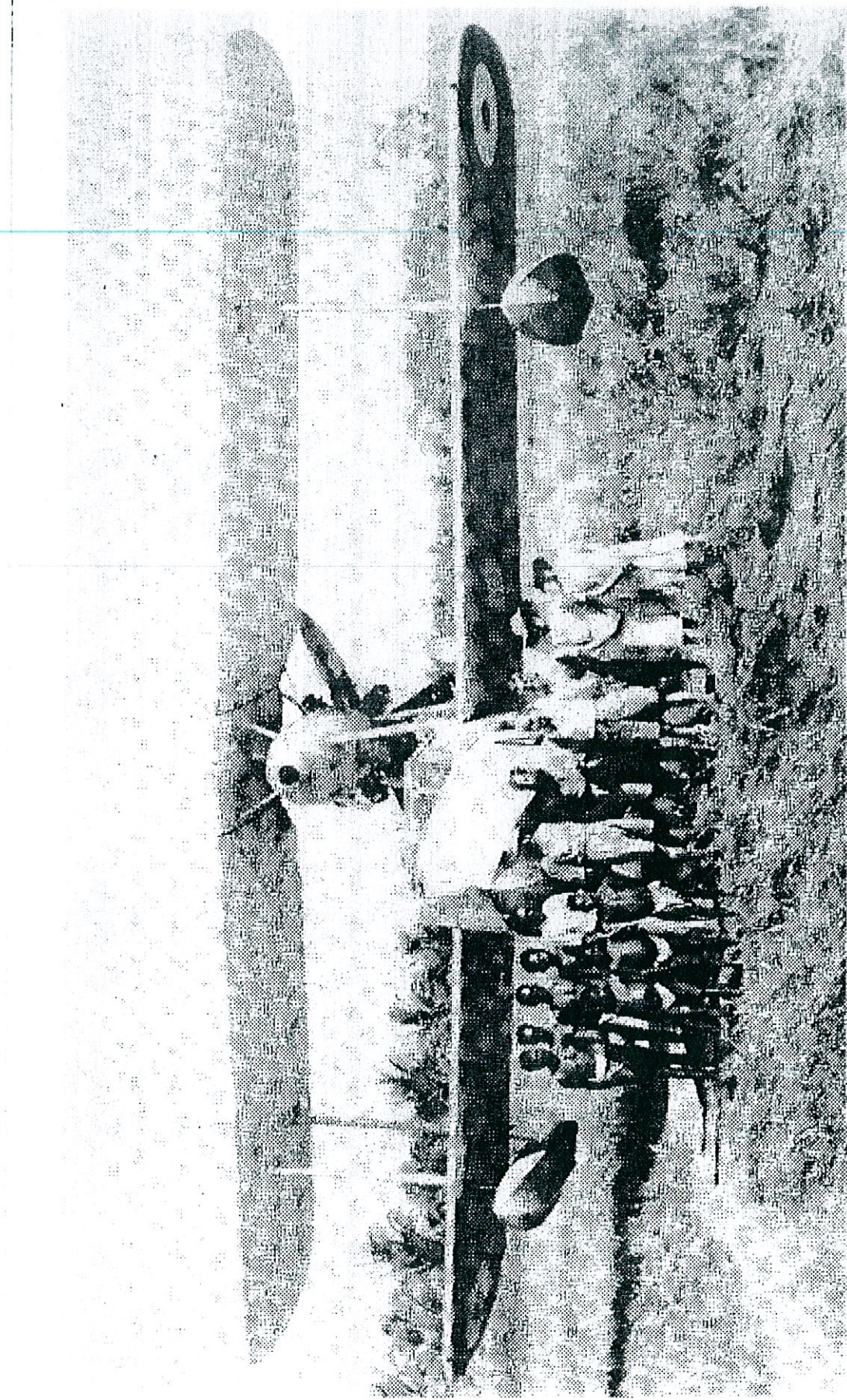
At the time, Len's son, Noel Jackson, was only 6 and he was to become a Methodist minister. At one stage he was a missionary in Tonga. A grave of coconut palm trees near the old mission house on Goulburn Island, North Arnhem Land was dedicated to Leonard Kentish. A plaque commemorating his life and the war years at Goulburn Island was unveiled on 11 August 1953.



The Heath Parasol built by Harold Shepherdson from the blue prints sent from America in 1932.



The Heath Parasol in flight at Milingimbi.



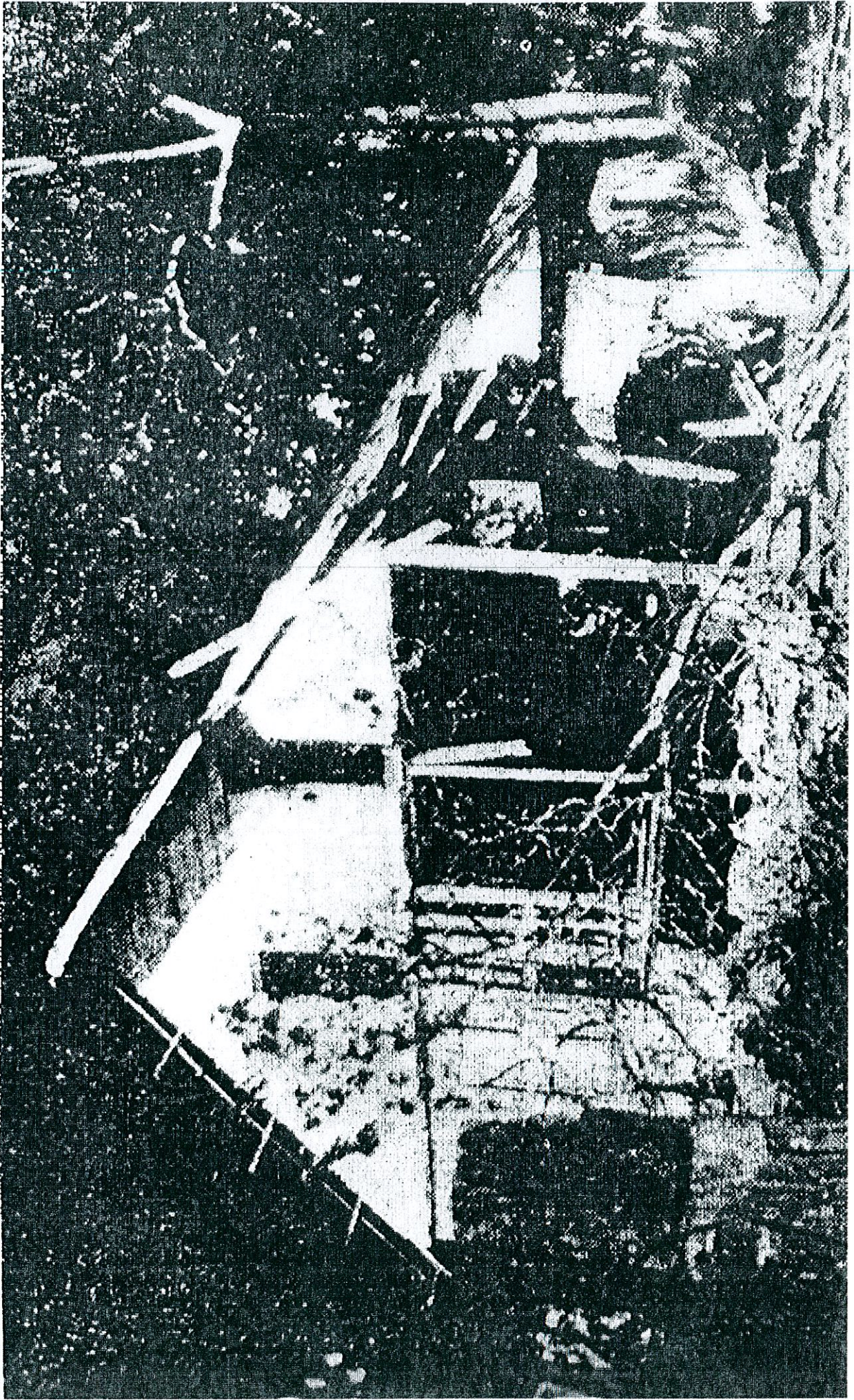
The R. A. A. F. Seagull amphibian which took Mrs. Chaseling (2nd from the right) from Darwin to Melville Bay. Dr. D. Thompson is 5th from the right. (About 1936.)



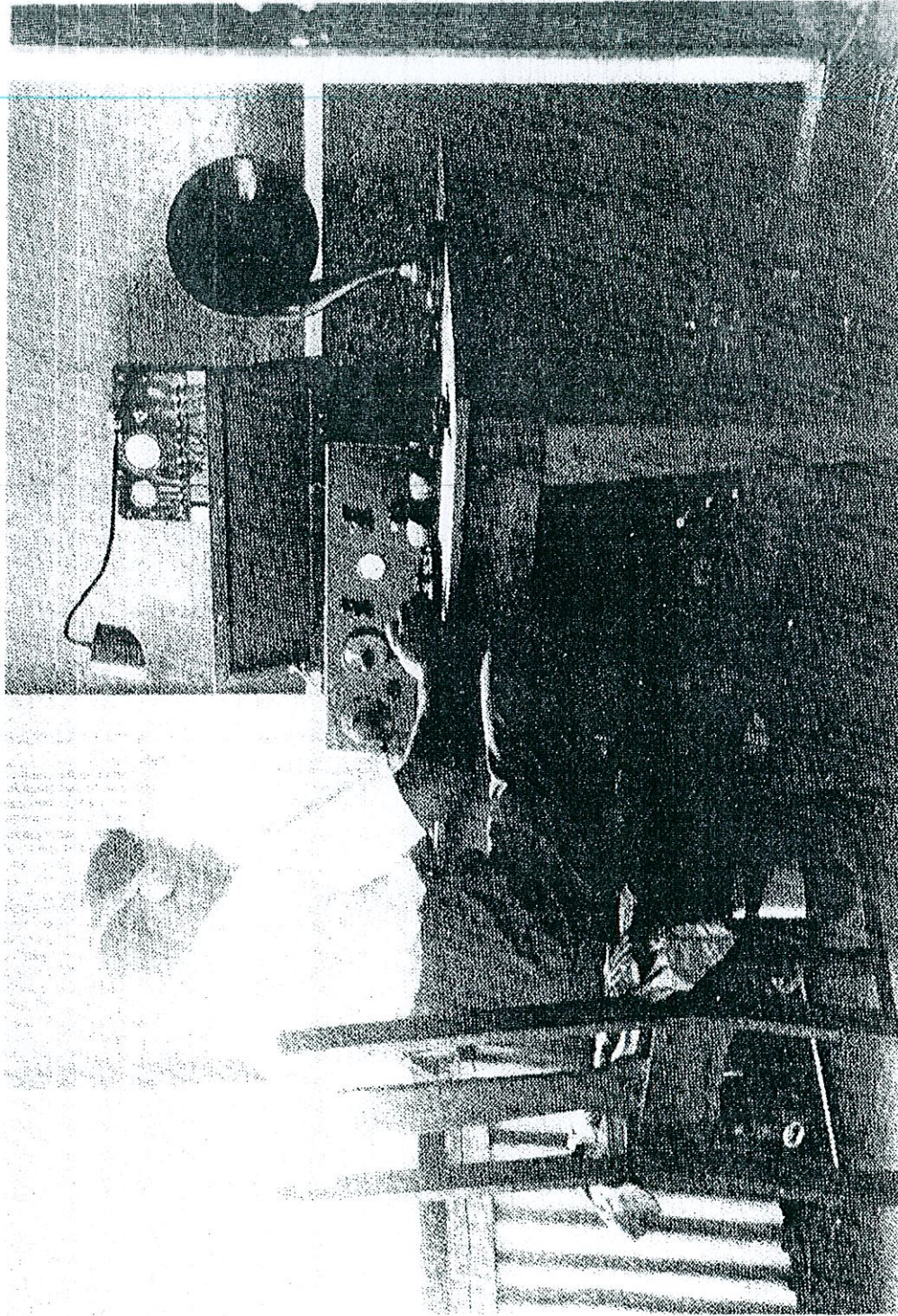
Dr. Clyde Fenton with his medical plane, a D.H. Moth, arriving at Milingimbi.



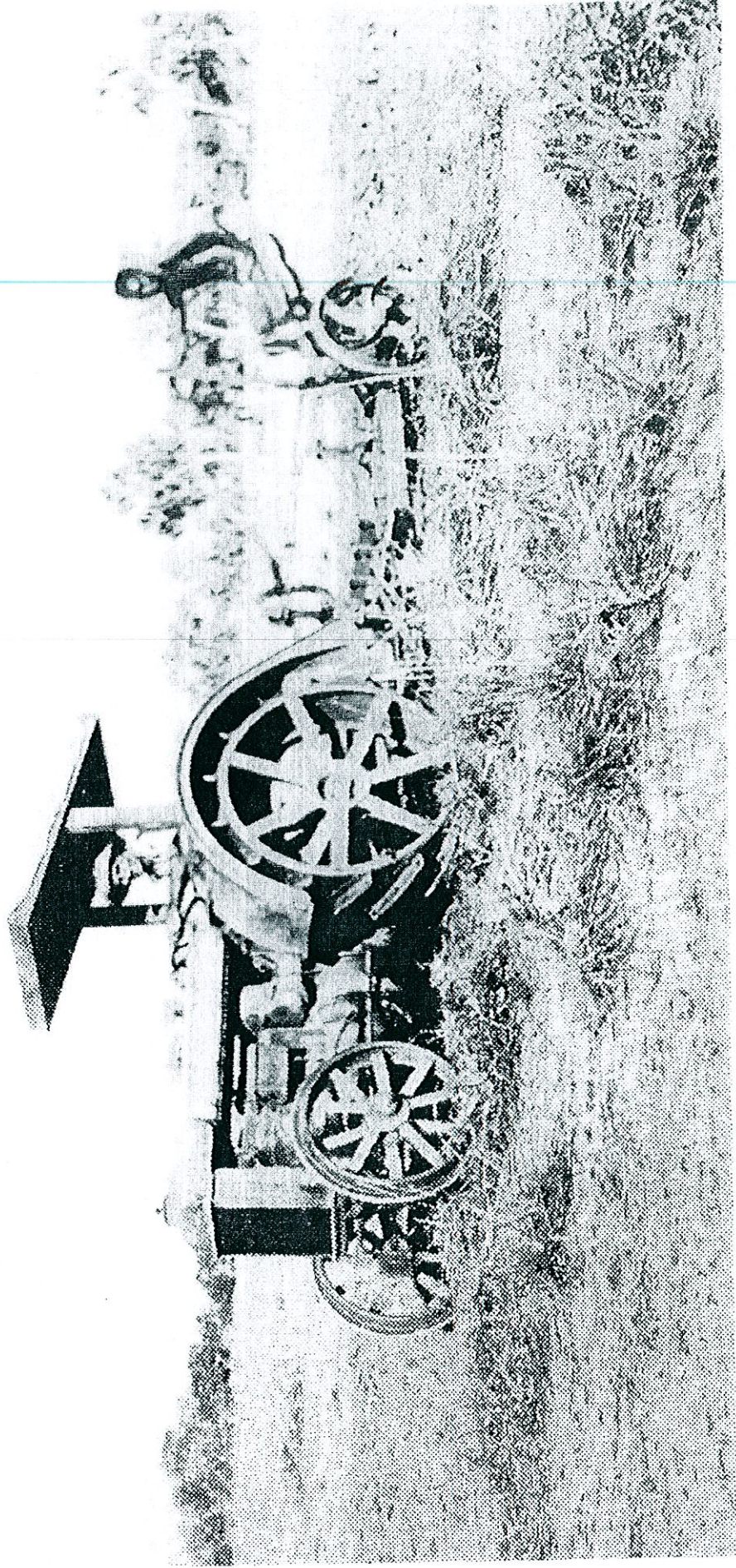
Michael Mungula at Gove's crash site. The fatal mid-air collision of two Hudson bombers occurred near Rapuma Is. on 20th April 1943



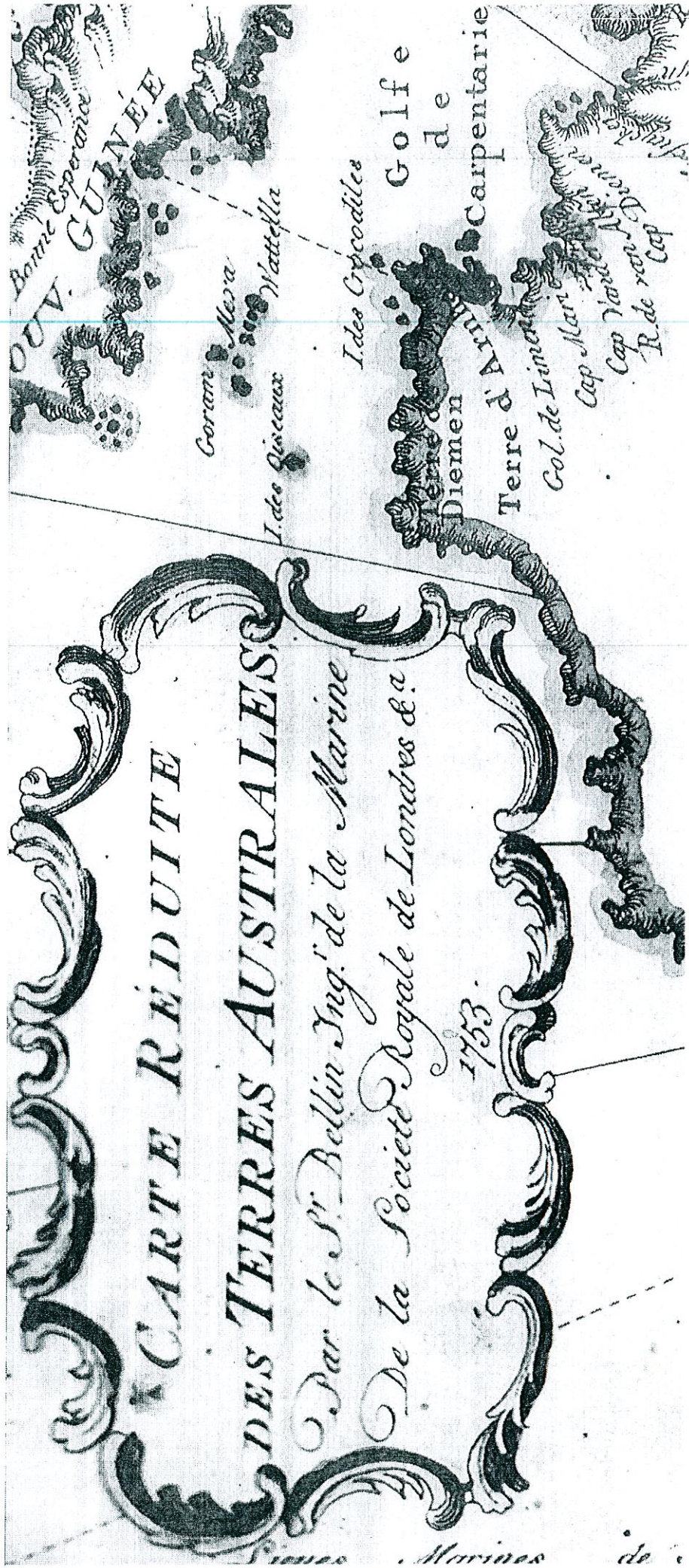
The Milingimbi Church wherein Gulmata died during the first Japanese bombing raid on 11th May 1943



Mr. Shepherdson operating the Traeger pedal wireless set, 1930. Contact could be made with Cloncurry 700 miles away, on morse code.



Mr. Sweeney and an Aboriginal helper, Moliolg, preparing the ground for crops.



Crocodile Islands on the Belling Map 1753