

Missionaries as Coastwatchers

Although missionaries disapproved of direct Aboriginal employment with the armed forces, they were proud of Indigenous people who contributed to mission coastwatching. Missionaries considered coastwatching tiresome because it interrupted other activities, but as J.S. Harris summarised, ‘one begrudges the time but still it has to be done’.⁸⁸ **Coastwatching** in remote regions provided Yolngu with productive work that concomitantly precluded unwarranted interracial contact with the military. Some coastwatching tasks successfully detected Japanese raids on Darwin that approached over Arnhem Land.⁸⁹ While most patrols were routine, sometimes the military requested special reconnaissance to investigate rumoured Japanese presence in Arnhem Land.⁹⁰ Some Yolngu patrols led to the rescue of crashed American and Australian airmen.⁹¹ The fact that missionaries appreciated Yolngu coastwatchers while concurrently criticising the military demonstrates the missionary determination to maintain authority.

88 J.S. Harris, NTAS, Church Missionary Society of Australia, North Australia Committee, NTRS

1099. January 1942.

89 Thornell, *A Bridge over Time*, 123.

90 For example, in December 1941 the Navy requested a patrol to investigate a rumoured Japanese

petrol dump on the King or Liverpool Rivers. J.S. Harris wrote, ‘we sent two Native runners & they reported having seen only two empty drums’. J.S. Harris, in NTAS, Church Missionary

Society of Australia, North Australia Committee, NTRS 1099, December 1941.

91 See Thornell, *A Bridge over Time*, 129-33; see also *No Bugles, No Drums*. George Booth’s narrative

describes how Yolngu rescued him and his crashed men and assisted their transport to Milingimbi. See George Booth, *33 Days* (Elwood, VIC: Greenhouse Publications, 1988).

Another Yolngu tale of rescuing crashed airmen and transporting them to missions is available in **Wandjuk Marika**, 64-67.

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The Roper River Mission monthly reports do have gaps, but the entries during the war only refer to daily mission happenings such as school and treating illness.⁷⁰ The few references to the war were haphazard, either as descriptions of recent **Aboriginal coastwatching patrols** or records of planes spotted.⁷¹ Only incidents such as the bombing of Milingimbi or the discovery of a washed-up Japanese mine ‘made us realise how very close we were to the war zone’.⁷²

70 NTAS, Church Missionary Society of Australia, North Australia Committee, NTRS 1102, Mission reports and station council minutes of the Roper River (Ngukurr) Community, Contents Date Range 1942-1984. Mission reports cease after September 1942, then resume briefly in November 1942, then skip to January 1944. There is no mention of the war in any of the periods recorded, including November 1942.

71 See, for example, 2 March 1942, in NTAS, Church Missionary Society of Australia, North

Australia Committee, NTRS 704, Journals and diaries of the Angurugu Community. Contents Date Range 1942-1987.

72 J.S. Harris, April 1942, in NTAS, Church Missionary Society of Australia, North Australia Committee, NTRS 1099.

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The defensive needs of the region became more pronounced when the Japanese bombed Milingimbi and Goulburn Island missions in early 1943.⁶⁵ After that the Goulburn Island mission maintained a motor-launch ferry service to the RAAF radar post on North Goulburn Island.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ See Maisie McKenzie, *Mission to Arnhem Land* (Adelaide: Rigby Limited, 1976), 141-42 for information about the Goulburn Island bombing.

⁶⁶ Ellemor, *Warrawi Jubilee*, 19.

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June 1940 the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had provided the mission with the Navy Code, officially making it a coastwatcher station.

⁴⁰ Reverend Canon G.R. Harris, unpublished manuscript of autobiography, page 149, in NTAS, Cole, Keith, NTRS 694/P1, Records, photographs and research material about mission life in Northern Australia. Contents date range 1915-85. Reverend Len Harris would eventually spot and report Japanese reconnaissance planes to Darwin. See NTAS, Harris, Len, NTRS 226, Oral History Interview, TS 64, pages 8-9.

<http://www.msp.unimelb.edu.au/missions/index.php/missions/article/viewFile/20/22>
