

The Sydney Daily

No. 46,595 First Published 1831

Telephone: Editorial 282 2822; Gener

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How Japan took an Australian

By ALAN GILL

Mrs Violet Kentish has a story to tell which will startle Australia's military historians: in 1943, a Japanese airman landed in Australian waters and captured her husband.

It happened virtually within wading distance of the Northern Territory coastline, almost certainly the only case of an Australian being taken prisoner in Australian sovereign territory. He was later executed.

Even now, only a few people know what happened. The capture has never been made public. Mrs Kentish herself spent several years ascertaining the facts which have finally emerged.

There have been other reports that Japanese military units — in addition to bombing Broome and Darwin — landed in remote regions of the Northern Territory and Western Australia during World War II.

Most of these reports are dismissed as fanciful. But this one is true.

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

The boat, which had two officers and several seamen on board, was attacked near Elcho by a Japanese seaplane. It sank, and then made repeated passes, shooting at the survivor they struggled in the sea a couple of hundred metres from shore.

The Japanese warplane landed on the water. Mr Kentish, who was wounded, swam toward it, ignoring or not hearing (he is partially deaf) warning shots from his companions. After a brief conversation, the pilot pulled into the co-pilot's seat and the plane took off.

Despite a count by witnesses, the report of the cap



Mrs Violet Kentish in her Brisbane home yesterday, with a wartime photograph of her dead husband.