


Milling timber at the Mission (Len Harris Collection)



**THE TERRITORY  
REMEMBERS  
75 YEARS**

Commemorating the Bombing of Darwin  
and defence of Northern Australia

# The Territory Remembers

## The Coastwatcher and the Aborigines: World War II comes to Groote Eylandt

By John Harris

The surveillance and management of Australia's long and remote northern coastline has always been problematic. From the British settlements in the early 1800s to modern Border Protection, successive governments have struggled to maintain an effective presence along this difficult border.

Never was this a greater challenge than during World War II when, around Australia's northern coast and islands, a small band of civilians in isolated locations were asked to serve as official Coastwatchers. They became part of a larger coastwatching network which included New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. As the war progressed, the whole coastwatching operation became Most Secret<sup>1</sup>, particularly to protect the identity of Coastwatchers in New Guinea, who found themselves behind enemy lines. Identifying information was not placed on record and eventually, in an attempt to protect the identity of the Coastwatchers, the term Coastwatcher was dropped altogether and replaced with code words.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to World War II, Len Harris (the author's father)<sup>1</sup> was a missionary on Groote Eylandt in North Australia. One of an informal network of unofficial observers, he had a pedal radio, reporting any unusual activity as part of a daily radio schedule. After Japan entered the war by attacking American and British bases in the Pacific, this previously loosely-organised band of observers was placed directly under the command of the Royal Australian Navy. Harris

was one of those formally sworn in as a Coastwatcher. It is hoped that by telling his story, a little of the unrecognised service of these few dedicated Australian volunteers and their Aboriginal friends will be better understood.

### The first Australian coast watchers

After World War I, the Royal Australian Navy faced the problem of monitoring Australia's long, undefended northern coast where an enemy could operate without hindrance, even without detection. Acting on the advice of Captain JG Clare<sup>2</sup>, but working with very limited peacetime resources, the Department of Defence established a network of unpaid civilians to observe and report on activities on the coasts of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. In times of war, these Coastwatchers would become Australia's frontline. Australia's own northern coast was still vulnerable and so the Navy soon recommended that the scheme be extended to include the Australia's own northern coast. The Department of Defence agreed and issued a directive in March 1927:

*"I am directed to inform you that the Department of Defence has devised an organisation, known as the Coast Watching Organisation, whereby selected civilian residents in coastal regions will report voluntarily to the proper authority unusual movements, activities, etc. coming under their notice in time of war. An outline of this scheme together with Coast-Watching Guide, showing method of reporting, is attached."*

*"Although the comparative absence of communication precludes an extensive application of the scheme there, it is now desired*

to include North Australia in the scope of the Organisation... (and)...supply the Government Resident, Darwin, with copies of the Coast-Watching Guide for distribution to such officials or trustworthy civilians whose location renders them particularly suitable for inclusion in the scheme.”<sup>3</sup>

On the remote north Australian coast, the Northern Territory authorities sought out the relatively few suitable recruits, mostly Christian missionaries who had local knowledge and good contacts with Aboriginal people. They were advised of the creation of the Coast-Watching organisation and asked if they were “prepared to act under this scheme and make any reports from time to time which may become necessary and where opportunity offers”.<sup>4</sup>

Twelve people were finally appointed as Coastwatchers.<sup>5</sup> Six of these were already Government officials so only six were true volunteers. Five of the six were missionaries at the Bathurst Island, Goulburn Island, Roper River, Groote Eylandt and Milingimbi (Crocodile Island) Mission Stations. Each of these responded formally in writing expressing their willingness to serve as Coastwatchers as an act of duty. The missionaries all sought permission from their organisations before accepting. Rev Hubert Warren<sup>6</sup> of Groote Eylandt Mission wrote:

“[I] will gladly undertake to act as you suggest under this scheme. The Church Missionary Society at the instigation of the Bishop of Carpentaria has requested me also to do what I can to fall in with your plans.”<sup>7</sup>

The only question raised was the implication of names appearing on official lists and whether these would be made public. Father (later Bishop) Francis Gsell<sup>8</sup> of the Bathurst Island Mission wrote:

“In reply to your circular re Coast-Watching Organisation, I have the honour to state that I do not like to have my name enrolled in the official list. At the same time I consider it to be a strict duty of conscience of every loyal citizen to help his country to the utmost of his power in case of necessity; and should this necessity arise, I shall not be wanting to my duty. Meanwhile I am always at the disposal of the Government for any information required.”

It may have been at that point that the decision was made not to record missionaries’ names but to refer to them by their positions, such as ‘Missioner’ or ‘Missionary-in-Charge’, at a particular place. This in turn may account for the fact that when the missionaries changed, their position and title in official Coastwatching correspondence remained constant.

These volunteer Coastwatchers were issued with the official Coastwatching Guide<sup>9</sup>, a very serious and strongly-worded document, referring in bold capitals to their duties “in time of war or proclaimed imminence of war”. It went on to detail the reporting of warships, submarines, aeroplanes and the landing of enemy troops. Fortunately in those first years, there was virtually no recognisable enemy activity on which to report. Nevertheless, these first Coastwatchers understood that although this was not wartime, they were still expected to report unusual or suspicious happenings. Their means of communication, however, were at first far more limited than the Guide presumed, with no access to the telephones or post offices mentioned in the guide.

Leslie Perriman<sup>10</sup>, the Missionary-in-Charge on Groote Eylandt in 1933, felt it necessary to explain that his apparent failure to reply to official correspondence was due, not to neglect of duty, but to the impossibility of prompt communication. The letters to which he was expected to have replied were dated 19 September and 29 November 1932 but arrived together at Groote Eylandt on 1 March 1933!<sup>11</sup> A specific example of these Coastwatcher communication problems occurred on 15 January 1933 when Aborigines from the east coast of Groote Eylandt came to the mission and reported that a month previously they had seen a steam ship with one funnel travelling north.

Perriman immediately wrote a report on this sighting but, as it transpired, the irregular shipping to Groote was further delayed and the letter did not leave Groote Eylandt until 28 February when Perriman himself was able to board a vessel en route to Roper River. He delivered the letter to Roper Bar Police Station. It finally reached Darwin on 20 March, just over three months from the original sighting<sup>12</sup>. Communication to and from Groote Eylandt, however, was about to be revolutionised.

In the 1920s, Rev John Flynn (‘Flynn of the Inland’)<sup>13</sup> of the Presbyterian Church’s Australian Inland Mission, was planning his Aerial Medical Service, the precursor of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Conscious of the problems of communication over vast distances, he employed talented young engineer Alfred Traeger to work on the design of a small, easily-operated radio transceiver.<sup>14</sup> Traeger developed his legendary pedal-operated radio, based on German World War I equipment.

The invention of the pedal radio suddenly gave isolated outposts the possibility of a link with the outside world. The Australian Inland Mission distributed 150 pedal radios freely to remote settlements such as missions and cattle stations. Almost all were equipped with them by the mid-1930s.<sup>15</sup> The initial intention was to give these isolated communities access to medical aid but this new instant method of communication proved to have many more uses.

The Northern Territory Administration quickly saw the advantage of the new radio communication for policing and other official purposes. The Naval Intelligence Division also recognised the value of the new technology to their volunteer Coastwatchers and, by the mid-1930s, ensured that all mission stations on the northern coast and islands accepted and understood their responsibility to report any enemy activity. The agreement was that the Coastwatchers would make daily radio contact, whether there was an important reason or not, via the Australian Aerial Medical Service radio station in Cloncurry, from where messages were relayed to the appropriate authorities and through which, in return, they could receive instructions. This was to become the legendary daily radio schedule – ‘the sked’.

As the potential value of the Coastwatchers became evident, attempts were made to provide some more specific support than the previous “biennial letter”.<sup>16</sup> Those on the Northern Territory coast were visited from time to time by the Northern Territory Administration’s patrol boats as part of their police and customs duties,

although the Coastwatchers furthest from Darwin may only have been visited annually.

One of the tasks of the patrol officers was to check up on Japanese fishing luggers. The Japanese were permitted to come ashore to take on fresh water. The Northern Territory authorities were anxious about preventing loss of revenue if the Japanese failed to pay duties on pearl shell and other dutiable catches. There was an agent in Darwin through whom Japanese luggers were supposed to be registered, but there were also many unregistered luggers and the trade was difficult to control.

The abuse of Aboriginal women was a particular concern. Theoretically, all luggers were required to seek specific permission to enter waters adjacent to Aboriginal Reserves. Father John McGrath of Bathurst Island Mission,<sup>18</sup> for example, reported many luggers in March 1938 and was able to provide registration numbers for most of them.<sup>19</sup> The Officer in Charge of the Coastal Patrol reported that only three of them had permission to enter prohibited waters.<sup>20</sup> Such infringements were very difficult to police. An added security issue arose when it was realised that some Japanese luggers had radios and that they could intercept messages from the Coastwatchers.

On 8 October the Rev. Chaseling<sup>21</sup> at Yirrkala Mission Station sent a telegram in the following terms to the Administrator in Darwin:

*"Foreign luggers continually anchoring Bremer Island Melville Bay Area (Stop) Repeated attempts to molest native women.*

*"The Administrator has advised that the contents of this telegram were known to the Japanese pearling agents in Darwin at the same time as, if not earlier than, he received the telegram. It will be appreciated that the sending of messages which can be picked up and read by the Japanese vessels would only tend to act as a warning..."*<sup>22</sup>

Following discussions between the Administrator and the Navy, it was determined that, from this time on, sensitive radio messages should be transmitted in code. Enquiries revealed that some missionaries already possessed a copy of "Bentley's Code"<sup>23</sup> This was not necessarily used for ensuring secrecy. This kind of codebook was commercially available, mainly for the purpose of brevity as telegraphic messages were costly and charged by the character. The final decision, however, rested with Naval Intelligence, and they decided on an alternative cypher system, "Everybody's Pocket Code"<sup>24</sup> which was distributed in sealed packages to seven mission stations.<sup>25</sup> Although it was also a commercially available code, the rationale was that Japanese crews were unlikely to be able to decipher the code or, if they did, it would take them too long for the message to be of any advantage to them. With the distribution of the code, the Navy assumed full control of the Coast-Watching organisation:

*"While this is primarily a war time organisation, they have been instructed to communicate direct to this Office, and if possible, Navy Office, Melbourne, any movements of foreign craft etc. in their area during peace time, which may be of interest."*<sup>26</sup>

The mission pedal radio transmissions could not reach Melbourne and so what happened in practice was that the missionary Coastwatchers continued to radio Cloncurry as they had always done and the radio operator there relayed any messages concerning foreign vessels to the Navy.

In 1938, in order to improve the policing, customs and Coastwatching network, a purpose-built Patrol Vessel, *Kuru*, was constructed in Sydney and commissioned to regularly patrol the Northern Territory coast and islands and visit the Coastwatchers.<sup>27</sup> Captain John Bell was at the time Chief Officer of the Coastal Patrol.<sup>28</sup> He automatically became Master of the *Kuru* on its arrival in Darwin.<sup>29</sup>

The new patrol vessel was effective along the coast adjacent to Darwin and nearby islands but the acknowledged reality was that it was still impractical to patrol as far away as the Gulf of Carpentaria with any degree of regularity. The missionary at Groote Eylandt was told that he need not continue daily reporting of Japanese vessels in the Gulf unless they were committing a serious offence, as no immediate action could be taken from as far away as Darwin merely to check on the registration of a Japanese lugger. In retrospect, it is a pity that the Japanese vessels were not perceived as a security threat and that they were not more closely monitored but the Navy's resources were simply insufficient to patrol the Gulf and the threat was not sufficiently recognised until too late.

### **Len Harris becomes a Coastwatcher**

Church Missionary Society missionary, Rev Leonard John 'Len' Harris,<sup>30</sup> arrived on Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria early in 1939. On the island were several hundred local 'Warnindilyakwa' Aboriginal people,<sup>31</sup> about 20 Aboriginal mission residents<sup>32</sup> with two or three mission staff and, at Umbakumba in the north of the island, a recently-arrived trader and beachcomber, Fred Gray.

Not long before Harris arrived, Qantas Airways had pioneered their ultimately short-lived Sydney-London mail and passenger flight using C-class Empire flying boats.<sup>33</sup> With very short flight ranges compared to modern aircraft, the flying boats had to stop to refuel 39 times en route to London. Between Townsville and Darwin, one of these refuelling stops had recently been set up with a small staff at the lagoon at Umbakumba.

One of Harris's many duties was to maintain the daily radio schedule. He thereby assumed the task of Coastwatcher – the person referred to in official documents as the 'Missioner'. CMS simply told him that the radio schedule was one of his responsibilities. As for operating the pedal radio, he taught himself with the help of a few notes. There was no formal induction to the role but merely advice telegraphed by the radio operator at Cloncurry. It was a year before there was a visit by *Kuru*. Fortunately, one of Traeger's main aims had been to develop an easily-operated radio which required no previous training or experience:

*"I was at the Emerald River Mission on Groote Eylandt. My contact with the outside world was with the famous pedal radio set. Mine had a large dry battery for receiving but for transmission depended on the pedal dynamo underneath the wireless table. In those early days, wireless contact was with*



Cloncurry. I was 8XK Groote Eylandt and every day I made a call to Cloncurry to send or receive telegrams. Besides the missions, cattle stations had a pedal radio and Mr Traeger at Cloncurry was the 'life-line' for many people in the outback." <sup>34</sup>

If the radio operators did not know each other already, they found themselves daily overhearing each other's messages and very rapidly became a network of friends, often called upon to help each other:

"Not long after I arrived, Roper River Mission was in trouble and needed urgent help but there was something wrong with their pedal radio and they could only manage a very weak Morse Code signal. I could pick it up on Groote but Cloncurry was too far away. I wasn't yet trained in Morse Code but there was a Morse Code alphabet pinned to the wall in front of me, so I just got on with it." <sup>35</sup>

As for detecting any enemy activity, Harris and his colleagues were given little if any instruction and so, with the benefit of hindsight, they were probably not as vigilant as they might have been. But they did not know that war was looming, nor had they been told to be suspicious of the Japanese fishing boats, which had been visiting the Gulf waters for decades, unless the crew were obviously acting illegally. That mistake was not the Coastwatchers' fault but due to official short-sightedness regarding Japanese intentions in Australian waters:

"Japanese fishing boats were common in the Gulf although I personally never communicated with any of them. They did sometimes contact Aboriginal people. I saw cloth and tins of tobacco that Aboriginal men had got from the Japanese, trading them for pearl and trochus shell, but their relationship with the Japanese was not always amicable. I heard about the abuse of Aboriginal women but the luggers kept well clear of the missions. I could only presume they were legally fishing our waters. In fact Aboriginal men on the mainland at Caledon Bay just north of us had been arrested for aggression towards Japanese fishermen – surely an indication that the authorities were aware of the Japanese and permitted them to be there with the full protection of the law." <sup>3</sup>

"But the crews were certainly not just fishermen. They included Japanese Navy personnel. Sometimes when I was with fishing with the Aboriginal men, I saw them in uniform myself on the decks of the luggers when they came in close to drag their fishing nets in the shallow water. They watched us through binoculars but I had binoculars myself and I managed to observe them unobtrusively too. After I had reported this a few times, I was told it was not necessary to keep reporting it every day and that the Japanese luggers were permitted to come on shore to take on water. Even back then before the War, it was a bit of a surprise to me that no-one seemed to be officially interested in what the Japanese boats were actually up to. It didn't take much to work out that the Naval men did not travel all the way from Japan on the fishing luggers. They must have met up with the luggers on a ship north of us somewhere. Of course, later on we found out that they had been mapping the coast in preparation for a possible future invasion. But even back then before the war, rumour had it that if you wanted a good map of the Gulf you could buy one in Japan." <sup>36</sup>

Len Harris continued conscientiously performing his Coastwatching duties as best he knew how while carrying out his many other tasks. The few mission staff members under his charge worked in very demanding circumstances to provide education and particularly health care to the Aboriginal people. One important function of the pedal radio had always been medical advice. Harris himself carried out emergency surgical procedures while connected by pedal radio to the Flying Doctor, Clyde Fenton.<sup>37</sup>

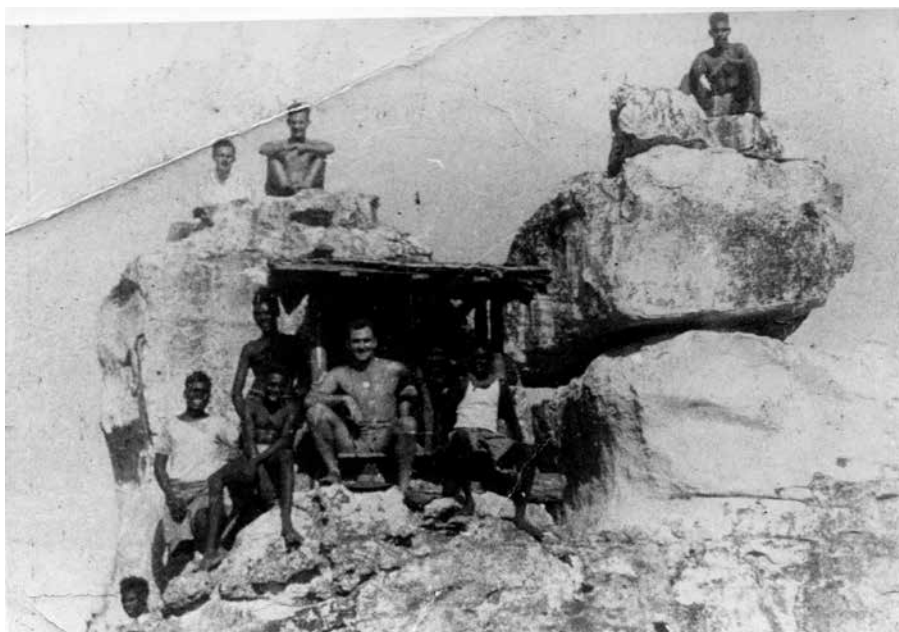
Although Harris was a missionary, much of his time and energy was at first taken up by the construction of an airfield. <sup>38</sup> Longer-haul aeroplanes were being developed but it was still a long way from Townsville across the Gulf to Darwin. Only the Flying Doctor, Clyde Fenton, had ever landed an aeroplane on the island. Famed for his aeronautical exploits, Fenton used to land on beaches, get Aboriginal people to assist him to turn the plane and then clear any awkward trees and scrub for take-off.

The aviation authorities needed an intermediate airfield somewhere in between, particularly for emergency RAAF use. Negotiations with the Church Missionary Society to accept a contract for the construction of the facility on Groote Eylandt had commenced before Harris arrived but the responsibility of supervising the task fell to him, someone quite untrained for the job. It was a large task for the isolated little mission and the local Aboriginal men, constructing an airfield of two runways at right angles to each other, 183m wide and each 1.6km long:

"The Aboriginal men were willing enough to work for a bit of pay. No one was forced to – how could I force anybody to do anything, even if I wanted to? Actually, they were all eager to be part of it, part of the strange activities of the whites, I think, a welcome change from their everyday lives. I was never sure how many of them could really envisage what it was all about until a plane actually landed but they were strong workers. Fortunately there was an old tractor at the Mission but I couldn't have done the job without the half-caste Mission men especially Gerry and Fred Blitner. <sup>39</sup> They were so skilled, so hard working. They were the foremen and they got on so well with the local Aboriginal men – after all, they had been hunting and fishing with them for years.

"It took us a month or so to grub out all the trees and clear the two long strips and then a few months to flatten it all. Gerry and Fred devised really ingenious ways of digging up the big boulders with the tractor and a chain. It was hard work but we did it and we were all proud of the job. It was a great day when I could get on the pedal radio and say it was finished. A few days later they sent an Air Force plane from Darwin to try out the airstrip. I think every Aboriginal man woman and child came to see a plane land for the first time. What a day that was! It was a Hudson Bomber. We heard it coming for about five minutes but when it appeared it was coming in at about 45°. It hit the ground at too steep an angle and bounced off. The pilot controlled the plane and then came in at a better angle, just skimming the trees. I was worried that this proved that our airstrip wasn't up to standard. But the pilot laughed and said that the Hudsons were a bit front heavy and that he had sent the crew down to the tail end before the second landing.

“The RAAF approved of our work. They were worried that planes like the Hudson Bomber might not make it from Townsville to Darwin in adverse weather, so they decided to make our airstrip an emergency refuelling base. They contracted us to mill timber to construct some huts. They sent some tradesmen from Brisbane to erect them and sink fuel tanks. The Aboriginal men helped them dig. They sent two men to manage the little emergency base, Wallace and Beer were their names, good blokes.” <sup>40</sup>



resources. He enlisted the services of his former colleague, Lieutenant Commander Eric Feldt, who was working in New Guinea at the time but had remained on the Naval Reserve list.<sup>43</sup> Feldt's naval experience coupled with his knowledge of New Guinea made him ideally suited for assuming responsibility for the intelligence organisation in the north:

*“It would be my duty, firstly, to ensure the proper functioning of the organisation as it was; and, secondly, to expand it so that it would cover all our needs, using civilians as Coastwatchers...From the point of view of defence, the islands in the North-East Area form a chain screening Australia from the north and east. It was, in fact, a fence, but with several gates, the straits between the islands. My job was to make the fence effective as soon as possible. There were some Coastwatchers in the area but not enough to cover it.”* <sup>44</sup>

As a Coastwatcher, Harris logged in daily, ignoring ordinary Japanese activity as instructed but reporting incidents he thought worth noting. He encouraged Aboriginal people to tell him about anything new or unusual. But there was very little of significance, or so they thought, and the radio schedule was dominated by medical matters and private communications.

This false sense of security continued for nearly two years. Even when war broke out in Europe in September 1939, real danger still seemed far away to Harris and his Coastwatcher colleagues on the other remote islands around Australia's northern coast. That was to change suddenly and decisively for the Coastwatchers in December 1941.

### War comes to Australia's north

Well before World War II began, Australian authorities, especially Naval Intelligence, were concerned about Japan's Imperial intentions in the Pacific region, although it does not appear that they ever connected that with the activities of the Japanese fishing luggers. As early as 1935, Director of Naval Intelligence, Commander RBM Long, had tried to close the gaps in the Coastwatcher network,<sup>41</sup> especially to Australia's north in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, but he was hampered by a peacetime lack of resources.<sup>42</sup>

Japanese aggressive territorial policies were clearly demonstrated in Japan's invasion of China in 1937. The long, bloodthirsty and finally unresolved war with China was reaching a stalemate by 1940. Japan's attention shifted southwards in what they called “Nashin-ron”, the policy of southern expansion. Japan invaded Indochina (Vietnam), from where they could pose a threat to European possessions in Southeast Asia, including British Singapore and Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), although the threat was not taken seriously soon enough in Australia.

In 1939, at the outbreak of the War in Europe, Commander Long found himself with emergency powers and more

Feldt and the Naval Intelligence Division determined at the time that New Guinea and the Solomon Islands formed the first line of defence, and so Feldt concentrated his efforts on setting up an effective Coastwatching network on those coasts. Australia's own northern coasts were considered less strategically important at the time and so little changed there. Harris and the other missionary Coastwatchers continued to do what they had always done as carefully and faithfully as they were able.

On 7 December 1941, Japan entered the War, attacking the US Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbour and, almost simultaneously, US bases in the Philippines, Guam and Wake, and British bases in Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong. The once-distant War was now in Australia's own region and Australian forces were under attack in Singapore. If Singapore fell, there was no doubt that the Japanese would rapidly extend their aggressive southern advance.

The Naval Intelligence Division took immediate steps to improve the effectiveness and communication capability of the Coastwatchers – and, with such increased risk of attack, this now included the previously unofficial volunteers on Australia's own northern approaches. Immediately following the Japanese attacks, the Navy requisitioned the Northern Territory coastal patrol vessel *Kuru*, attaching her as *HMAS Kuru* as a tender to *HMAS Platypus*.<sup>4</sup> John Bell had by then joined the Royal Australian Naval Reserve. His previous experience as Master of *Kuru* made him highly suited to command

the newly-commissioned vessel. He formally assumed his responsibilities on 8 December with the rank of Probationary Lieutenant.<sup>45</sup> One of his major initial tasks was to revitalise the old voluntary observer network and place it on an official footing.

### Coastwatching on wartime Groote Eylandt

On 12 December 1941, galvanised into action by the Japanese attacks, *Kuru* was despatched around the north coast and the Gulf of Carpentaria. Bell's task was to visit the north Australian network of unofficial Coastwatchers, formalise their role, brief them on what and how to report and provide them with Teleradios. He visited all the mission station staff involved in the old arrangement, including Father John McGrath at the Sacred Heart Mission on Bathurst Island, and Rev Leonard Kentish at the Methodist Mission on Elcho Island. About a week later he reached Groote Eylandt. *HMAS Kuru* anchored near the mouth of the Emerald River. Bell took the ship's launch up river to the CMS mission station, the now-abandoned site which is still locally called "Old Mission":

*"Late in 1941, around the middle of December, Captain Bell on the Kuru called at the Emerald River Mission. He told me that the sudden expansion of the War into the Pacific meant that the whole Coastwatching operation had now been formally taken over by the Navy and that it was to be extended and put on an official footing. He asked me if I was willing to be part of this new organisation and serve as an official Coastwatcher. The Navy had already contacted CMS in Sydney, he told me, and they had agreed that the decision was up to me. I had not the slightest hesitation. It was after all simply a question of duty. Captain Bell administered the oath and I was sworn in as an official Naval Coastwatcher.*

*"Captain Bell told me that the reorganised group included the existing Mission Coastwatchers, all the ones I knew from before like Father John on Bathurst Island and Len Kentish on Elcho Island. They needed us because we were the only ones always in touch with the Aborigines. He told me that they would fill in the gaps between the missions with Naval officers. I eventually got to know some of them too, like Petty Officer Jack Jensen on Marchinbar Island. They lived a pretty isolated life with supplies dropped off by the Kuru every now and then.*

*"After I was officially sworn in, Captain Bell gave me the Playfair Code instructions<sup>46</sup> and the secret Code Word which I have never revealed – not even now! It also functioned as my code name, I think. He taught me how to use the Code and issued me with cards of silhouettes of both Japanese and allied planes and ships so I could recognise them. He only stayed the one day. He returned to the Kuru before dark and left for Mornington Island the next day. But the great thing he did before he left was to give me a brand new Teleradio 3C. This was indeed a terrific improvement."<sup>47</sup>*

Len Harris's AWA Teleradio 3C was charged by a Briggs and Stratton petrol engine. It was enough simply to fill the petrol tank once a week and run the engine dry, so operators in remote locations did not need a huge petrol supply. A single 44-gallon drum lasted some months. There were two 12 volt wet batteries which stored enough power to send and receive messages for a week. Compared to the old pedal radio, the range of the new teleradio was remarkable:

*"I had been instructed to send out a general call next morning, like I used to with the pedal radio and see how well I was received. Of course they were expecting my call at VID Darwin Coast Radio. They were to be my new radio contact so they replied almost instantly. I spoke to Lou Cornock in Darwin for a bit and then Thursday Island came on air and told me they were receiving me loud and clear. Then to my great surprise, I got a message from South Australia saying my signal was strong even down there. I had arrived in the world of radio!*

*"We all knew things were getting serious now. I rapidly learned how to use the Playfair Code. Some of our communications were by voice but anything we thought strategically important was coded. Listening to everybody on the radio, I sensed an apprehension. Nobody knew what was going to happen and although people did not admit to being nervous, it was a kind of unspoken truth between us. We all knew there had to be a reason why the Navy suddenly thought us Coastwatchers were important."<sup>48</sup>*

Naval Intelligence Division's fears of the possibility of Japanese aggression proved more than justified. The Pacific war escalated with frightening rapidity. Bell had not long completed setting up the new Coastwatcher network when, on 19 February 1942, four Japanese aircraft carriers, *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Soryu* and *Hiryu*, 400 kms north-west of Darwin, turned towards the wind and began launching 188 planes - 71 dive bombers, 81 medium bombers and 36 Zero fighters.<sup>49</sup>

At 9.30am, Coastwatcher Father John McGrath at the Sacred Heart Catholic Mission on Bathurst Island saw the huge flight pass overhead. Using his newly-issued Teleradio, he contacted VID Darwin Coast Radio. Radio Operator Lou Cornock passed the message immediately to RAAF Operations who received it by 9.37am. But the Coastwatcher's warning was not heeded.

Twenty minutes later the first bombs fell on the town. A dismal mix of inexperience, poor inter-service communications, personal antagonisms and plain inertia left the town and the massed shipping without warning.<sup>50</sup>

On that morning, at least 235 people were killed – Army, Navy and Air Force personnel and many civilians including waterside workers and all the Post Office staff.<sup>51</sup> Hundreds more were wounded. Twenty aircraft and eight<sup>5</sup> ships including both US and Australian Naval vessels were destroyed. Almost all civil and military facilities were rendered inoperable:<sup>52</sup>

*"I was at the other end of the island at the flying boat base at Umbakumba on the morning of 19th February. While I was talking to them a radio message came through that Darwin was under attack and that bombs were falling on the harbour and the town. Then the radio went dead. The silence was frightening. 'It's taken a direct hit', we thought. We had no idea what we should do, and imagined we could be the next target. We decided that we would see or hear any Japanese planes approaching and that if we did we would just run and hide in the jungle.*

*"We stayed glued to the silent radio. About two hours later we heard a plane. We ran and hid ourselves away from the buildings. When we saw the plane, it was a flying boat, very low over the trees. It came down on the lagoon. The officer in*



charge of the refuelling depot said, 'Well, padre, now we have a problem! Who is flying the plane? Them or us?' He knew the crew couldn't get ashore without swimming. So he got a loaded rifle and took the launch out, staying at a distance. Brave of him, nevertheless. After a while the door opened and the pilot called out. It was obviously an Australian pilot and there was a flight steward with him.

"The pilot said that he thought he couldn't just hide and do nothing with Darwin being destroyed around him. He managed to locate another crew member and they found a rowing boat and rowed out through the burning harbour to a flying boat which somehow had not been hit. The engine had started straight away, he said, and they simply taxied through the burning ships, found clear water and managed to take off. They took the most direct overland route to Groote. They flew low almost touching the treetops all the way, he said, expecting to be shot down any moment.<sup>53</sup>

"There was still no radio contact with Darwin but I was a Coastwatcher after all so I decided I should head back to the mission in case I had to be near my radio. The next day radio communication was restored. Of course in due course I found that my colleague Father John McGrath had in fact reported the Japanese planes flying over the Bathurst Island Mission. It was all a tragic irony really. The Navy set up a Coastwatching network and then the one time they really needed it, the people in charge in Darwin ignored it. It worked perfectly but they didn't believe their own system. Father John was a good, intelligent man and Lou Cornock was totally dedicated and efficient. They were just ignored. There could have been far fewer lives lost..."<sup>54 6</sup>

Around Groote Eylandt there was suddenly a marked increase in Japanese activity to report. It seemed to Harris that the Japanese were exploiting the temporary disarray in Australia to venture more boldly into Australian territory. Japanese planes became a daily observation although they were mostly flying very high. Harris identified most of them as Zero fighters, no doubt from Japanese aircraft carriers to the north. There were Japanese ships in the Gulf too, not only fishing vessels, but Naval ships taking advantage of the period when the Australian Defence Forces were preoccupied with more than 60<sup>7</sup> subsequent attacks on the Australian mainland including the awful carnage in Broome:

"It was always possible that Groote could have been attacked. I actually thought it quite likely. The Japanese spies on the fishing boats must have known about the Emerald River Mission for decades and all the other isolated Missions as well of course. But now we had two mile-long landing strips right next to the mission. I thought it was like painting a target on us really. The Japanese planes flying high overhead must have regularly seen the airfield and the mission buildings nearby.

"Every now and then the Aboriginal men would get smoke signals relayed from the coastal people via Bickerton Island, telling of the sighting of Japanese ships between Groote and the mainland. That didn't surprise me at all. Their fishing luggers had always been hanging around that area before the war. Even back then I had wondered why they were checking out the Roper River. It was navigable right up past the Mission and I know there were Naval officers on them. I felt certain that the Japanese, after destroying Darwin, were now thinking about cutting off the north at the Roper River.

"The first ship I actually saw for myself came between Groote and nearby Bickerton Island. Aboriginal people first saw it and alerted us. I went straight away and reported it and then climbed Castle Rock to see for myself. It was a small ship but through binoculars obviously a Naval vessel, an armed vessel. Next day, on the radio schedule I got to talk to a senior officer. He said the information was important and had been put out to Navy and Air Force Intelligence but that they couldn't do anything about it at this point. They had no planes available since so many had been destroyed."<sup>55</sup>

Groote Eylandt was now in a war zone and came within the emergency powers of the North Western Area Command. One of the most complex issues to deal with was the presence of civilians in what was now a war zone and how to ensure their safety. Many civilians in Darwin itself had already fled. CMS was officially advised by the Department of Army that the security of the northern missions could no longer be guaranteed. Shortly after the bombing of Darwin, a decision was made to evacuate<sup>8</sup> women and children from the north to Adelaide, Sydney and other southern cities. The Qantas refuelling base was placed under Air Force control. Len Harris's wife Margarita, 'Margery', and their young son, John, were evacuated from there in a flying boat carrying wounded servicemen which had come down for refuelling at Umbakumba.

A far more complex issue was the fate of the half-caste women and children. Harris feared for their safety in a Japanese invasion. They were all light-skinned, English-speaking people who would simply be presumed to be Europeans. It was possible that the Japanese might leave Aboriginal people alone but no such guarantee could be made about the light-skinned people. North West Area Command agreed and ordered the evacuation of the half-caste women and children from the island and coastal missions but, overstretched already, they were not able to offer a great deal of support.

The women and children, under the care of three amazingly dedicated missionary women, were taken by boat to the Roper River Mission and from there all the way to Sydney on the back of a truck. North Western Area Command eventually provided some limited material assistance but it was a long and arduous journey. They had no real idea where they were going and the evacuees mostly slept by the side of the road. One of the babies died on the way. This whole operation is now controversial and the author has provided details elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> It was however the only responsible and compassionate option achievable at the time. What some modern critics fail to understand is that this was war time and that responsible people were quite rightly afraid for the safety of others. They had to make the best decisions they could under great pressure and then act on those decisions without much material support. In retrospect it is easy to look back and say that the Japanese did not invade and that the war ended in 1945. No one knew that then. No one knew that an atomic bomb existed:

"We had no idea when it would end. I thought it would go on for another ten years at least. So did all the Air Force and Army men I met. I did not think the Japanese forces could get as far as Sydney or Melbourne but I expected they could well take the north. I know there were official contingency plans

*to fall back south and give up our part of the Territory. I often wonder what would have happened to me if they did.”* <sup>57</sup>

CMS had taken the hard but patriotic decision to keep the missions open with a minimal staff and not “desert their post”. Len Harris volunteered to stay on alone at the Emerald River Mission, aware of his responsibility to the Aboriginal people who very much needed the care the mission provided, but he was conscious also of the oath he had taken to serve as a Coastwatcher. He later wrote: “I am not afraid of being in a War Zone. God is greater than the Japs and I am quite at peace with him in this matter.” <sup>58</sup>

With Australian Defence resources stretched to the limit, the Japanese seemed to know that they could continue to risk sending small Naval vessels into the Gulf. Before the war, the closest to the mission Harris ever saw fishing luggers was when they anchored off Bickerton Island, one of their favourite watering places and less than 20km from Groote. The Japanese Naval vessels still seemed interested in Bickerton Island. Harris wondered if they had something hidden there but if they did, the Aboriginal people never found it:

*“One evening an excited group of men paddled across from Bickerton to report that numbers of Japanese had landed there. I tried to send a coded message straight away but it didn’t get through – I don’t think VID Darwin was tuned to our frequency that night. So I had to wait until next morning.”* <sup>59</sup>

That evening, as a result of the Japanese landing so close to the mission, Harris felt that he should openly discuss the possibility of a Japanese invasion with the Aboriginal people. It had been worrying him for some time. He did not want to fail them but he also knew that he should not simply presume what their response would be.

The question of where Aboriginal loyalties might lie was being openly discussed at that time. There were irresponsible, scaremongering letters to newspapers but there were also serious official reports. Lutheran missionaries of German descent were incarcerated during the War and there were concerns that Aboriginal people from the Lutheran missions in Central Australia may have been sympathetic to the Germans and therefore to the Japanese. There were also concerns being voiced that those Aboriginal people who had reason to feel they had been treated unjustly could think that life might be better under the Japanese. And there were concerns that traditional Aboriginal people, living in remote parts of Australia and knowing nothing of the War, might simply see the Japanese as another intruder but perhaps one with whom to co-operate as a source of desirable goods.

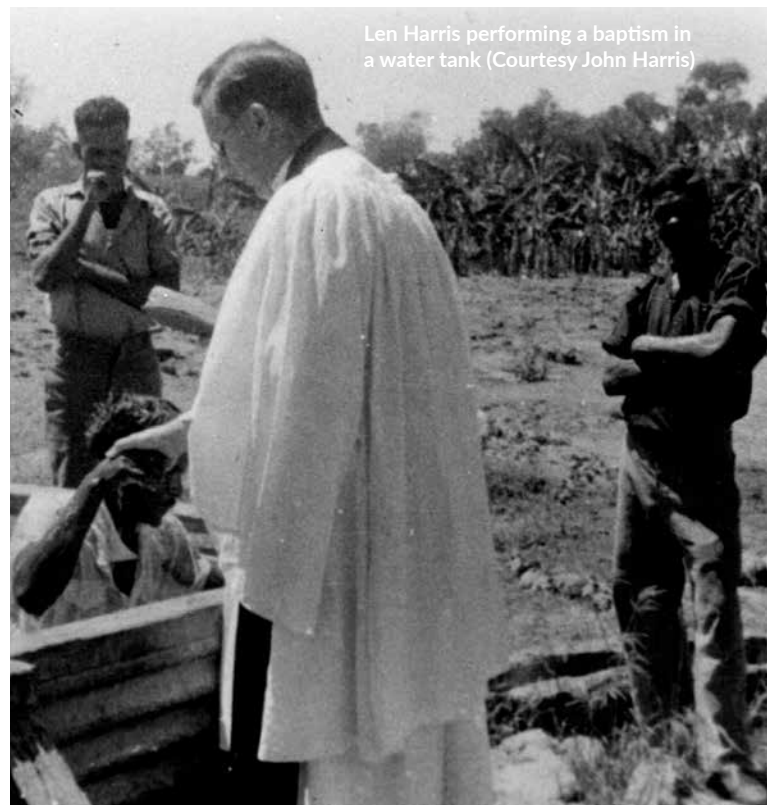
This question of Aboriginal loyalty during World War II has been fully discussed in Robert Hall’s excellently researched book *The Black Diggers*.<sup>60</sup> After canvassing all aspects of the issue, Hall draws the clear and now obvious conclusion that most of those fears were irrational and can now be seen to have had little or no real support in the hearts and minds of the vast majority of Aboriginal people. At the same time as doubts were being aired about Aboriginal loyalty, Aboriginal men were being enlisted to fight for their country. Their courage and self-sacrifice speaks for itself. Many were killed but the sad reality is that those who

survived returned to a still racially-divided Australia, where they had fewer rights than they had experienced in the armed forces.

Harris had absolutely no fears for his own safety at the hands of the Groote Eylandt Aboriginal people, whom he regarded as close friends but he knew they did not really comprehend the scale of a Japanese invasion and what it would mean to them. He realised that he needed to be proactive, raise the subject and begin an informed discussion in which they could consider how they should act:

*“I thought the discussion would be best in their space, not mine, so I took some flour and tea and sugar down to their campsite. I got the old men together, the decision-makers, Groote men and Bickerton men too, the ones who had come across with news of the Japanese landing.”<sup>61</sup> We sent the small boys for a few more sticks of wood, stoked up the fire, made damper on a hot rock and boiled the billy. Then I broached the subject. My Anindilyakwa was a bit inadequate for such a serious topic but with a bit of broken English thrown in I managed as best I could. ‘The Japanese might come with all their ships and guns and fighting men’, I said. ‘They might come here and take this country, take Groote Eylandt. Maybe you might be better off with the Japanese than the white people. They might give you more things, more cloth, more knives, more tobacco, more tucker...’<sup>62</sup>*

*“There was much more I had planned to say but they cut me off. They had understood everything – brilliant linguists they are, speaking multiple languages. They talked together earnestly and excitedly, using two languages among themselves, Anindilyakwa and Nunggbubuyu, and I got a bit lost. They chose one spokesman and when I didn’t catch on here and there they enlisted the help of the small boys who had learned some English when the school was operating. They too argued among themselves about the correct English and the whole thing would have been quite hilarious if the subject wasn’t so serious.*



Len Harris performing a baptism in a water tank (Courtesy John Harris)



"Many people came here over the years,' they told me. 'We used to trade with the Maccassans every year – axes, buckets, cloth, tobacco, grog – but they never stayed on, just gathering trepang until the monsoon winds took them home. Some of our old men went to Maccassar as crew on the prahus when they were young and they can still speak that language. The Maccassans stopped coming but then the Japanese started coming in their fishing luggers. We could see they weren't always fishing but snooping around and we were always suspicious of them. But yes, we did trade with them sometimes, exchanging pearl shell and trochus for cloth or tobacco.

"The Japanese interfered with our women too,' they said. 'Some of them went willingly to them to sell themselves for tobacco, especially over on the coast, but many were taken by force and some were hurt or even killed'. They stressed to me that the killings were never here but on the coast at Blue Mud Bay and Caledon Bay. 'On Groote we always protect our women and girls' they explained. 'We hide them we don't let any stranger go near them'.

"Yes,' I said. 'I heard that you even used to hide the women and children from the first missionaries!' They laughed at that. 'Yes,' they said. 'We used to hide them before, until we learned that the missionaries were good people and wouldn't hurt them'.

"The Japanese just came to take what they wanted and went away again,' they said. 'They didn't care about us. The only people who ever cared about us were you missionaries. You came and you brought medicine and you helped the children. And you brought tucker like this tea and damper'. They all laughed at that. 'And what's more,' they said. 'You missionaries stayed on and lived with us on our land. You let us see your wives and children and you showed no fear and you trusted us. So if there is any fighting, we are on your side.'" <sup>63</sup>

This was the outcome Harris had expected but the words needed to have been spoken and he was glad that he had taken the initiative to bring the question out in the open. Unlike most Aboriginal people across the continent, the Gulf people at least had some history of contact with the Japanese, experience of the Japanese fishing boats and crew and therefore a context in which to consider their response to the War. But there was now a second, personal question on which Harris genuinely wanted their advice. What should he himself do?

"I said, 'Well that's great but what about me. Right now armed Japanese are just over there on Bickerton Island. What if they come over here tonight? What are we going to do?' They said, 'Don't you worry about anything. You just go home and go to sleep. We know what to do'. I trusted them and I felt safe in their care." <sup>64</sup>

The Aboriginal people knew how to organise themselves quickly if they had to. They sent the women, children and frail elderly people away to one of their secret places to hide for the night. They mustered all the warriors, about 40 armed men in all. They had shovel-nose spears, man-spears tipped with iron, three spears to a man. They posted lookouts on the beach and at the mouth of the river and along the road up to the mission. There was no other way, especially at night, with swamp and jungle blocking any other access to the mission:

"The warriors hid behind rocks and big trees all along the track to the mission, hoping to ambush the Japanese, ready in typical Aboriginal fashion for the silent spear in the dark and the quick escape into the jungle. I slept very soundly, actually. I don't think I had realised how worried I had been about everything and having had that discussion was all a great load off my mind. Nothing happened of course. The Japanese left Bickerton under cover of darkness but we were not to know that then. They could easily have intended to come over to Groote and it was essential that we should have had a plan. I sensed that the Aboriginal men were a bit disappointed really.

"In the morning I reported the Japanese landing on Bickerton on the radio schedule. The radio operator, Lou Cornock, got the Navy duty officer to come to the radio. He thanked me and said the information would be passed on but that there was nothing they could do about it. I said, 'Well, what if they do land on Groote one day? What if the mission is really threatened?' 'Listen, padre,' he said, 'No heroics now! If there's ever any kind of imminent danger, put an axe through the radio and go bush!'

"My Aboriginal friends had worked that out already! 'You get us an empty petrol drum,' they said. 'The young men can take it and hide it near Yantarrnga<sup>65</sup> and you can live in one of the caves there. We'll keep it full of water and bring plenty tucker for you. The Japanese wouldn't find you there and we'd never tell them either.' I certainly didn't need any more reassurance of their loyalty and friendship." <sup>66</sup>

Harris and his Aboriginal friends did set up his campsite in a cave and Harris slept there a few nights. They considered bringing his radio and generator but Harris decided that they did not need to go that far. With his Aboriginal friends now motivated to be on the lookout for Japanese ships, Harris decided that in the event of a landing, he would have enough warning to leave the mission for his hideout.

Harris continued to observe and report Japanese planes and naval vessels. His informal network of Aboriginal observers and the use of smoke signals extended his observation area all the way to the coast. He heard of the crews of Japanese naval vessels trying to get information from Aboriginal people:

"An Aboriginal family were camped at the mouth of the Roper River, fishing by day and sleeping behind the beach at night. One morning they paddled their canoe out early to Maria Island, halfway between the Roper mouth and the Limnen mouth. Beyond the island they were surprised to see a ship. The young men paddled out to investigate. As they got closer to the ship they recognised the writing as Japanese, the kind of writing which they were accustomed to seeing on the Japanese luggers. 'This is an enemy ship!' they said to each other. At first they didn't want to go closer but then they were spotted by a crew member who went and got someone whom the young men took to be the Captain. He called out to them in English and began tossing things overboard for them. Intrigued they went closer and retrieved tins of tobacco and other goods in watertight containers. The Captain kept beckoning them closer so they paddled up to the ship.

"Where's the Roper River Mission?' he asked them. They kept their cool and betrayed nothing. 'We don't know,' they

replied. 'We don't know about any mission.' The captain threw them more things and they came even closer. 'This is the Roper River, isn't it?' he asked, pointing to the Roper River delta north of the island. They lied. 'You're too far south', they said. 'That's the Limnen River'. The Captain seemed to believe them because he threw them a few more things and went away and the ship sailed off to the north. We owe Aboriginal people more than we realise."<sup>67</sup>

With major Air Force bases in Darwin and Townsville, the North West Area Command began to recognise the potential strategic value of basing a small permanent Air Force unit on Groote Eylandt in the event of a Japanese attempt to take North Australia. There was a need for more than a refuelling depot with a staff of two:

*"The top man himself flew out to investigate, Group Captain Fred Scherger. He was later knighted, I heard, and became Chief of the Air Force."<sup>68</sup> He was a friendly enough bloke, I thought. 'Sherg' the men used to call him. He certainly got things going. He told me that we had built an excellent airstrip and that they would not need to do much to it to establish a proper base. They built more huts and brought in a lot of equipment. There were about 30 men there at times – not just Air Force, but Army and Navy too. Planes began to fly in and out regularly, much to the interest of the locals. I don't know why they didn't have a proper radio but I used to have to send and receive messages for them for quite a long time.*

*"Funny thing was, they covered all the Air Force huts and equipment with webbing, camouflage material, while only a quarter of a mile away we had a bright white-painted roof which they never tried to disguise during the War. It was like beacon! They could use it to locate the airfield, even at night. My friend the Flying Doctor, Clyde Fenton, had been drafted into the Air Force, no doubt because of his great local knowledge. He often landed at the airfield and came over for a cuppa and he said that he could always find the Groote aerodrome because the white roof of the mission house shone in the moonlight. He said that on really dark nights he had a powerful torch and he could hold it out the window and locate the roof and land safely."<sup>69</sup>*

The Japanese attacked Australia and Australian coastal shipping nearly 100 times between February 1942 and November 1943.<sup>70</sup> But from Harris's point of view, Japanese activity in and over the Gulf diminished rapidly due no doubt to the permanent Air Force presence on Groote Eylandt and the increased aircraft presence in the Gulf. He began to find

that his role as an active Coastwatcher was becoming less necessary. His official radio work was now almost all on behalf of the Air Force and not the reporting of his own observations of Japanese activity. He was more than willing to continue as a Coastwatcher but he also wanted to carry out his missionary work. He wanted to devote more time to translating the Bible into the Nunggubuyu language. He was very conscious that he was the only priest between the three CMS missions at Groote Eylandt, Roper River (now Ngukurr) and Oenpelli (now Gunbalanya). He longed to travel between the missions in his capacity as their minister, the job he had been appointed to do, but felt loyally tied to his Coastwatcher role.

CMS shared Harris's views and certainly wanted him to resume his religious duties. As early as March 1942, when CMS became aware of the upgrading of the Groote Eylandt aerodrome by the Air Force, they approached the Navy to ask about Harris's status and how necessary it was for him now to continue as a Coastwatcher.<sup>71</sup> It was then agreed that the Teleradio would in due course be handed over to the Air Force and Harris would be free to leave his Coastwatcher post. As it happened, this did not physically take place until much later in 1942 but by the beginning of 1943, when CMS was able to appoint another missionary to Groote Eylandt, Harris was freed to take up the role he so much wanted to fulfil, translating the Bible and travelling between the missions:

*"The strange thing is, it was in some ways just as dangerous a job. I suppose the RAAF base on Groote Eylandt may have made Groote a potential target but coastal travel was particularly dangerous. I travelled a lot by boat and in the mission lugger. In January 1943 my friend and fellow-Coastwatcher Len Kentish from the Methodist Mission on Goulburn Island was taken by the Japanese. He was travelling on a boat between missions. Near Elcho Island the boat he was in was bombed by the Japanese. He survived that, only to be taken from the sea by a Japanese float plane and never seen again. We did not find out until after the War that Len had been tortured and beheaded. I think he was the only Australian ever taken prisoner within Australia."<sup>72</sup>*

*"Was I ever frightened? Well of course I was, particularly when Darwin was first bombed and I felt so isolated on Groote. But never will I ever forget the loyalty and care of my Groote Eylandt Aboriginal friends. They were great people and I don't think Groote Eylandt will ever see their like again.*

*"I am proud to have made some small contribution as a Coastwatcher. In retrospect I now see that the real dangers we*



*feared never actually eventuated but we did not know that then. From our perspective then, I accepted that there was a risk. I chose the role and I expected that I could have been killed or taken by the Japanese. But so many Australians gave their lives. It was the least I could do. I never hesitated for a moment. It was simply a question of duty.”<sup>73</sup>*

### Recognition of Len Harris’s service

Len Harris returned to Sydney in 1946 where he spent the rest of his life in ministry in the Church of England (Anglican) Diocese of Sydney. His first appointment was as Rector of Blacktown. He took an immediate interest in the nearby Schofields Air Force Base. In 1948 he became Chaplain to the Schofields and Richmond Air Force Bases with the rank of Flight Lieutenant.

Some time afterwards he heard from missionary colleagues in New Guinea that missionary Coastwatchers whom they knew there had been commissioned as Navy Lieutenants and given Navy insignia. This was in the vain hope that a rank might give them better treatment if captured by the Japanese:<sup>74</sup>

*“I did wonder about that! I did swear an oath of loyalty administered by the captain of a Naval vessel in time of War. I can’t quite remember what the exact words were but I have always presumed that I simply became an official Coastwatcher. But now I have the rank of Flight Lieutenant anyway so it hardly mattered what I was back then!”*

In the 1970s, Harris’s wife Margarita became unwell so he sought out a quieter life for them both by taking a part time appointment as Priest in Charge of St Georges Gerringong on the NSW south coast. His salary was hardly enough to live on so a friend suggested to him that he might be eligible for a Service Pension through the Repatriation Department (now the Department of Veterans Affairs):

*“I was a little bemused at this at first. It had never really occurred to me that I would be eligible for benefits like that. But if other Coastwatchers had Navy rank, perhaps I might be eligible for something. So I thought, well, why not give it a go.”<sup>76</sup>*

Harris began the process of seeking a Service Pension in March 1973. The question of his eligibility was considered at the highest levels in the Repatriation Department and Department of the Navy. It was determined that he had not actually been commissioned as a Naval Officer but that he had indeed served as a Coastwatcher. One of the problems was that in any of the Restricted or Secret documents in which his name might have been mentioned, it was suppressed and he was referred to, if at all, only as ‘the Missioner’. However after investigations which took six months, Harris was granted a pension in November 1973. Len Harris died on 28 September 1988.

The research on which this paper is based commenced in 2009. Discovering any information regarding the determination that Len Harris received a pension proved very difficult. The Department of Veterans Affairs, while

acknowledging that Harris had indeed received a Veterans Affairs Pension, told the author that no file on him now existed. They did however provide what they said used to be his file number, AG489. It was the prefix which finally solved the problem. AG stands for Act of Grace. Harris’s pension was an Act of Grace, accorded to those who had in fact served as if they were in the armed forces but had not strictly been members. The National Australian Archives was initially unable to locate such a file. It was not for some years that an assiduous staff member came across a box of Act of Grace files and remembered the author’s search. Harris’s file AG489<sup>77</sup> was among them and in due course was cleared and released.

The Department of the Navy’s advice to the Commissioner for Repatriation was as follows:

*“Reverend Len Harris was not a member of the Commonwealth Naval Forces. Records held in this office indicate that the Missioner in Charge, Groote Eylandt (Church Missionary Society) acted as a Coastwatcher. He was issued with a teleradio and Playfair Code for use in carrying out these duties.”<sup>78</sup>*

The Department of Repatriation contacted CMS who confirmed that the ‘Missioner’ was in fact Len Harris, that he had served as a Coastwatcher, and that Commander RBM Long had sought CMS’s consent for the installation of the teleradio at the mission. Finally, the Department of Repatriation advised the Treasury to grant the pension:

*“The Commission considers that, having regard to the circumstances of the case, and to the precedent that exists for ex gratia payments to former coast watchers, Mr. Harris has a moral entitlement to consideration under the Repatriation Act as if his service on Groote Eylandt at the relevant time had been as “a member of the forces”. The Commission therefore seeks approval for payment to him, as an act of grace, of any benefit by way of service pension (and supplementary assistance if appropriate) that he could be paid if he were a “member of the forces”.<sup>79</sup>*

The Treasury approved the pension on 14 November 1973. He had deserved that small recognition. In his own words, “it was simply a matter of duty”.

### References

1. Unless otherwise acknowledged, quotations from Len Harris are from his papers (memoirs, notes, diaries, interview notes and other private information in the possession of the author), footnoted as Len Harris Papers. An oral history interview containing another version of much of this information is available at Northern Territory Archives Service, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews with ‘TS’ prefix, 1979-ct, Reverend Len Harris, TS 64.
2. [ww2australia.gov.au/coastwatcher/](http://ww2australia.gov.au/coastwatcher/)
3. Secretary Department of Defence to Secretary Department of Home and Territories, 24 March, 1927, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
4. Circular Memorandum from Government Resident to selected individuals, 2 September 1927, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
5. The twelve Coastwatchers appointed were four Police Officers; the Keeper of the Darwin Gaol; the Master (Engineer) of the Government ketch, Maskee; William Pruen, a cotton planter at Shaol Bay; and the senior missionaries at the Bathurst Island, Goulburn Island, Roper River, Groote Eylandt and Crocodile Island (Milingimbi) Mission Stations. (Government Resident to Secretary of the Navy, 22 November 1929, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory)

*Reverend Dr John Harris was born on Groote Eylandt. Initially a teacher, later an Anglican priest, he devoted much of his life to Aboriginal people and languages. A linguist and historian, he wrote a number of books on Aboriginal subjects. Now retired in Canberra, he and Judith have three children and six grandchildren.*





6. Rev Hubert Warren b. 1885, d. 1934, was a CMS missionary in North Australia. Arriving in 1913, he served in various capacities until 1934. In that year he died when the plane Miss Hobart disappeared over Bass Strait, as a consequence of which his son David later invented the Black Box.
7. Hubert Warren to Government Resident, 1 November 1927, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
8. Father Francis Xavier Gsell, b. 1872, d. 1960, was a missionary priest on Bathurst island from 1910 to 1938 when he was consecrated Bishop of Darwin from where he retired in 1949. He became known as 'the Bishop with 150 wives' because of his strategy of purchasing young Tiwi girls to rescue them from arranged marriages.
9. Commonwealth of Australia, Form C.W.2, Department of Defence, Coast-Watching Guide.
10. (Harry) Leslie Perriman, b. 1883, d. 1897, was a CMS missionary in North Australia from 1921 to 1941. He retired to Melbourne where he died at the age of 104.
11. H.L.Perriman to Secretary, Coast Watching Organization, 1 March 1933, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
12. H.L.Perriman to Coast-Watching Organisation, 15 January 1933, 1 March 1933, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
13. For full biography of John Flynn (1880–1951) see Australian Dictionary of Biography, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/flynn-john-6200>
14. For full biography of Alfred Hermann Traeger (1895-1980), see Australian Dictionary of Biography, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/traeger-alfred-hermann-8839>
15. Barrier Miner, Friday 14 July 1933 p 2
16. Secretary of the Navy to Government Resident, NT, 16 January 1930, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
17. eg see news item 'Patrol Ship's First Voyage', Courier Mail (Brisbane) 9 May 1939.
18. Father John McGrath, b. 1893 d. 1982, was a greatly loved Sacred Heart priest on Bathurst Island from 1927 to 1948. At the request of the Tiwi people of Bathurst Island, he was buried on the island.
19. J. McGrath to W. M. Henschke, 22 March 1938, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
20. T. Haultain to Administrator, 24 March 1938, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
21. Rev Wilbur Chaseling, b.1910 d.1989, was one of the founders of the Methodist Mission at Yirrkala in 1935. He became an authority on Yolngu culture and language.
22. J. A. Carrodus to J. W. Burton, 29 Oct 1937, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
23. E L Bentley, 1909, Bentley's Complete Phrase Code, New York: American Code Company
24. W. M. Saunders, 1911, Everyman's Pocket Code, London: W. M. Clowes and Sons.
25. The additional mission stations whose Superintendents became part of the Coast-Watching Organisation were Yirrkala and Port Keats.
26. Lt Commander Alexander Fowler to the Administrator, Darwin, 24 November, 1937, NAA Series F1, Item 1939/59, Coast Watching Organisation in the Northern Territory
27. [www.navy.gov.au/HMAS-Kuru](http://www.navy.gov.au/HMAS-Kuru) see also Wikipedia entry [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS\\_Kuru](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS_Kuru)
28. The Telegraph, Brisbane, 7 June 1938
29. John Symington Bell had served in the Royal Navy. Prior to his appointment to the coastal patrol, he commanded the lighthouse vessel Cape Otway. There is a large file on the Kuru, NAA Series J2826, Item NQ778, Launch Kuru Patrol Vessel. This file contains little historical information on the actual role of PV Kuru, being largely a financial/administrative file concerning various repairs, refitting and overhauls of the vessel. In the years 1938-1940, Bell is referred to in the file both as Master of the Kuru and Acting Nautical and Ship Surveyor in Darwin, so held these two posts concurrently.
30. Leonard John Harris, b. 16.11.1911, d. 28.09.1988. Len was ordained an Anglican priest on 13.02.1938 and married Margarita Morgan on 18.02.1939 just before taking up his appointment as chaplain at the Church Missionary Society 's Emerald River Mission on Groote Eylandt, NT, in 1939.
31. The Warnindilyakwa are theoretically one of the larger of the many Groote Eylandt clans but the term has been extended to include all Groote Eylandt clans and their Anindilyakwa language.
32. The Emerald River Mission on Groote Eylandt was initially set up as a kind of commune for needy Aboriginal children of mixed descent ('half-castes') from anywhere around the Gulf.
33. <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/flying-boats-of-australia>
34. Len Harris's papers. For source of this and other quotes from Len Harris, see note 2 above.
35. Len Harris Papers.
36. Len Harris Papers
37. Dr Clyde Fenton, b. 1901, d. 1982, was the first flying doctor in the Northern Territory and his own pilot. He was called up to serve in the RAAF in 1940 and two years later, as Flight Lieutenant, he was placed in charge of No. 6 Communications Flight, taking mail and supplies to remote Coastwatchers and RAAF bases.
38. Some official information is available in NAA, Groote Eylandt aerodrome, Series No E1404, Control Symbol 274/101/24.
39. 'Half-caste' is now generally regarded as a derogatory term but it was not always so. These part-Aboriginal people at the mission had been rescued from town camps and such places. Fathered and then deserted by white men, neither White Australian society nor Aboriginal society accepted them. They were brought whenever possible with their mothers to live in health and safety on the Mission. There they grew into fine, talented men and women. They were initially employed on the Mission in a range of responsible positions including teaching and nursing assistants, captain and crew of the mission lugger, stockmen etc. They later went on to make important contributions in the wider Australian community. Gerry Blitner in due course became Chairman of the Northern Land Council. Over 50 years later, he said, 'We owe CMS more than we could ever repay them'. This statement and other details of these people's lives are in John Harris, 1998, We Wish We'd Done More, Adelaide:Open Book Publishers, ch 6.
40. Len Harris Papers
41. <http://www.wv2australia.gov.au/coastwatcher/>
42. Eric Feldt, The Coastwatchers, Oxford University Press, 1946, p14
43. Feldt p14
44. Feldt p15
45. John Symington Bell, Service Record, NAA. He resigned from the Navy in 1951 with the rank of Acting Lieutenant Commander.
46. The Playfair Code or Playfair Cipher used an easily drawn grid in which the letters of the alphabet were arranged on the basis of a code word. It was a very suitable code for the Coastwatchers because it required only a pencil and paper to encode and decipher. It is now rendered useless by digital technology which can easily break the code but at the time it was a hard code to break without the secret code word and was therefore useful for encoding messages which had a short term importance but were useless to the enemy by the time they were decoded.
47. Len Harris Papers.
48. Len Harris Papers
49. Alan Powell, Far Country, Melbourne University Press, 2000, pp192-3
50. Powell, p193
51. The precise number of dead may never be known. 243 was for a long time the accepted figure and there is memorial plaque in Darwin saying 291 were killed. The best and most recent research suggests a figure of 235. See Tom Lewis and Peter Ingram, 2013, Carrier Attack, Kent Town, SA: Avonmore Books.
52. <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs195.aspx>
53. An historical note on the Qantas website reads, 'A Qantas crew saved an Empire flying boat near a burning munition ship in Darwin Harbour, taking off moments before the 11,000 tonne 'Neptuna'

exploded with such force that the stern landed the other side of the wharf.' <http://www.qantas.com.au/travel/airlines/history-world-at-war/global/en>

54. Len Harris Papers.
55. Len Harris Papers.
56. John Harris, 1998, *We Wish We'd Done More*, Adelaide:Open Book Publishers, pp 405-417
57. Len Harris papers.
58. Len Harris to John Ferrier, CMS, 14 May 1943. Copy in Harris's papers.
59. Len Harris Papers.
60. Robert Hall, 1997, *Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press. See particularly Chapter 6.
61. The Aboriginal elders present included Galiawa (Old Charlie), Nakwarrba (Banjo), Damiundu and Nawunawa (Old Mick).
62. Len Harris Papers.
63. Len Harris Papers.
64. Len Harris Papers.
65. Yantarrnga is a rocky hill in the middle of Groote Eylandt. It is sometimes called Central Hill and was also named Mt Ellie by Hubert Warren, one of the first missionaries, in honour of his wife's birthday.
66. Len Harris Papers.
67. This version of the story is as Len Harris recounted it. The story was often told in later years at Roper River (Ngukurr) by Old Agnes. The two young men were named as Isaac and Joshua. A recording and full transcript of Agnes telling the story are in the possession of the author.
68. Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Rudolph William Scherger, KBE, CB, DSO, AFC (18 May 1904 – 16 January 1984) served as Chief of the Air Staff from 1957 until 1961, and as Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, forerunner of the role of Australia's Chief of the Defence Force, from 1961 until 1966. He was the first RAAF officer to hold the rank of Air Chief Marshal. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_Scherger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Scherger)
69. Len Harris Papers.
70. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air\\_raids\\_on\\_Australia,\\_1942-43](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_raids_on_Australia,_1942-43)
71. NAA, Teleradio – Groote Island, Series No B3476, Control Symbol 133, Barcode 509101
72. For Kentish's story see [http://www.artsandmuseums.nt.gov.au/northern-territory-library/the-territorys-story/territory\\_characters#LenKentish](http://www.artsandmuseums.nt.gov.au/northern-territory-library/the-territorys-story/territory_characters#LenKentish) For the sinking of the Patricia Cam, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS\\_Patricia\\_Cam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS_Patricia_Cam)
73. Len Harris Papers.
74. After the capture, torture and murder of Percy Good, an elderly copra planter on Buka Island, off Bougainville, all civilian (Coastwatchers) were enlisted into the RAN in the probably naïve belief that their officer status would protect them if they were captured by the enemy. <http://www.wv2australia.gov.au/coastwatcher/>. Also <http://www.battleforaustralia.org/Theyalsoserved/Coastwatchers/CoastwatcherRole.html>.
75. Len Harris Papers.
76. Len Harris Papers.
77. NAA, File AG489: HARRIS, Leonard John, Series No A2806, Control Symbol, AG489, Barcode 13600061.
78. Memorandum, Dept of Navy to Deputy Commissioner of Repatriation, Sydney, 3.07.73, in file AG389.
79. Secretary, Repatriation Commission to Secretary, Department of the Treasury, 29 August 1973, in file AG489

## Notes

1. Ed: Most Secret was the equivalent of Top Secret today, signifying the highest level of a security classification, although there are, and was then, "compartmented" sections beyond that.
2. One such code word was 'Ferdinand', taken from the children's story *The Story of Ferdinand*, the tale of a bull who would not fight but preferred to sit under a tree and observe things. This was to emphasize that the role of the Coastwatchers was not to fight but to be unobtrusive and watchful. The code-word 'Ferdinand' was used more particularly in the Coastwatching operation in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.
3. Harris was correct. The most serious of these incidents occurred at Caledon Bay, northeast of Groote Eylandt, in 1932 when five Japanese men were speared. Aboriginal people always maintained that the Japanese were molesting the women. In a subsequent investigation, a police officer was also speared. He had 'arrested' a woman and the presumption was made that he was molesting her. Much has been written about this serious incident and its tragic aftermath but a useful starting point is the Wikipedia article, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caledon\\_Bay\\_crisis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caledon_Bay_crisis)
4. The big depot ship *Platypus* was a familiar site in Darwin Harbour throughout the war, surviving many air raids. She featured many on-board workshops, but was never taken outside the harbour.
5. Ed: the latest research shows that 11 ships; 30 aircraft and 235 people were the grim statistics for the day.
6. Ed: McGrath's warning was discounted as being a flight of 10 USAAF fighters in the area. If he had said there were over 100, and repeated the number, then there might have been a reevaluation in Darwin. However, there would have been little change to the defence of the town. The 10 Kittyhawks might have got up to height and fought more effectively but the 36 Zero pilots were far more experienced, and the Zero a better aircraft. The anti-aircraft defence would have probably had the same effect, given the gunners' lack of experience
7. Ed: the first raid was the only time carriers were used. All of the other raids over the next two years were from Japanese Navy and Army – they did not have a separate air force – based on the islands in what is now Indonesia, Timor and New Guinea. Current research is showing over 100 raids.
8. Ed: in fact, evacuation had taken place the previous year. By the time the Japanese initial raid occurred, there were only 2000 civilians left in the town, a marked decrease, with almost all women and children gone, while aboriginal people were taken south.