

**THE TERRITORY  
REMEMBERS  
75 YEARS**

Commemorating the Bombing of Darwin  
and defence of Northern Australia

Australian War Memorial P00022\_002

# The Territory Remembers

## The Cowra breakout, Matthias Ulungura and the capture of Toyoshima

By Paul A Rosenzweig

**It has been well acknowledged that an Aboriginal was responsible for capturing the first Japanese prisoner of war to be taken on Australian soil during World War II, but the nature of the capture has for many years been shrouded in mystery. It is a sad reflection on our nation that the courage and determination of Matthias Ulungura was not rewarded until four decades after the cessation of hostilities; even worse, five years after his death. Less widely known is that this Japanese airman - POW No.1 - a hero of the infamous raids on Pearl Harbor and Darwin, was also a key figure in the Cowra breakout, sounding the bugle and calling his countrymen to arms. This is a brief account of the fates of two brave men - Matthias Ulungura and Haijame Toyoshima.<sup>1</sup>**

### The Cowra breakout

The Cowra breakout, the most serious POW escape attempt in Australia, occurred on the night of August 4, 1944 at No.12 POW Compound. This was composed of four camps, each with accommodation for 1000 prisoners. Situated 2.4km north of the NSW town of Cowra and 319km west of Sydney, B Camp Japanese prisoners kept arriving until by mid 1944. There were 1104 of them, creating a most explosive situation.

The decision to relieve tensions by shifting the private soldiers to Hay only infuriated the Japanese and made them more determined to stage a mass breakout.

Having been informed by the Commandant on August 4 that the move would occur three days later, the prisoners

held a meeting at which it was decided to attempt the escape that night. The Official History records that: "At about 2am a Japanese ran to the camp gates and shouted what seemed to be a warning to the sentries."<sup>1</sup> This attempt to warn the guards is also well documented by Carr-Gregg<sup>2</sup> and Timms<sup>3</sup>, then a major-commandant of neighbouring C Camp.

Timms further recorded that "the four men of the quarter-guard raced for the southern Broadway gates, and got there only just in time, for even as they ran could be heard the thin notes of the Japanese bugle sounding the attack."<sup>4</sup> This was the signal for a frenzied rush at the wire by the prisoners, who were armed with a remarkable assortment of crude home-made weapons.

The threat of hordes of Japanese unleashed on the peaceful township of Cowra prompted many instances of gallantry amongst the Australian guards of the 22nd Garrison Battalion, Australian Military forces. None so great, however, was that demonstrated by Privates Benjamin Hardy and Ralph Jones who "punched their way through the prisoners, manned a Vickers gun and fired it until they were knifed and clubbed to death."<sup>5</sup>

The escapees were eventually killed, wounded or captured; 31 killed themselves while 16 of the wounded showed signs of attempted suicide. The garrison received several recommendations, while the courage of the two guards on the Vickers .gun was recognised some six years later with the award of the George Cross to their next of kin.



But what of the Japanese man who gave the signal for the breakout – the bugle call which aroused his comrades to rebellion in the early hours of 5 August – Hajime Toyoshima?

He had been brought to Cowra having been taken prisoner following the first air raids on Darwin on 19 February 1942 – the first acts of enemy aggression on Australian soil. He was immediately accepted by his countrymen as the Camp leader both for his ability to speak English and for his reputation gained during the raids of December 1941 and the following February over Darwin.

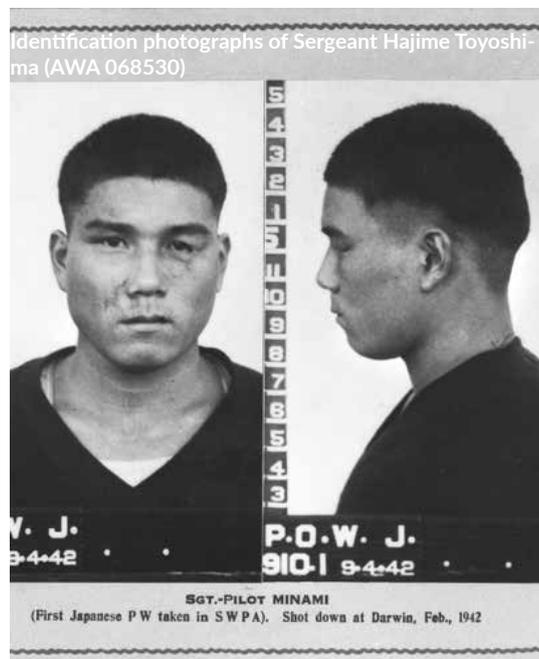
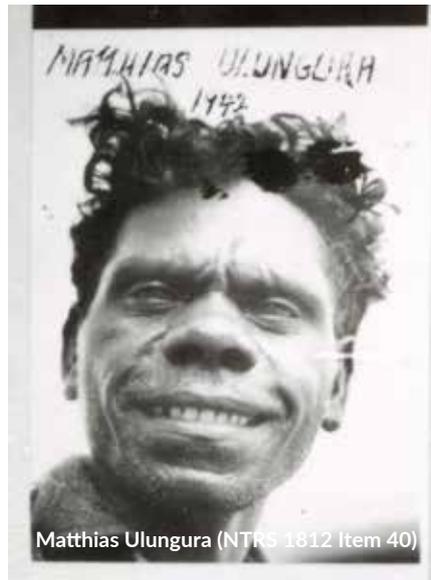
Following the first air raid over Darwin in 1942, Hajime Toyoshima crashed his disabled Zero fighter on Melville Island near Pickataramoor, now a Conservation Commission Forestry 'township'. Unable to destroy his aircraft as it was out of fuel, he set off in search of food and water, stumbling upon an Aboriginal camp.

Here he met a number of Tiwi women and, bowing to one of them, the airman took one of the babies, perhaps as a hostage. The child's mother, Mena Puantulura, later wrote a letter to her friends describing the events of that day: "When one boy saw the Japanese he yelled. Then that Japanese came to me and he salute me. I got properly big fright allright."<sup>6</sup> Gathering her friends, Mena set off 1 after the pilot, recovering her three month-old son Clarence who later became a lorry driver on Witness to this abduction at Tuyu was Matthias Ulungura together with his wife Marie Assumpta, younger brother Gregory and Mena's husband Aloysius Puantulura. The following

day, alone and unarmed, Matthias captured Toyoshima by surprising him as he walked past a tree behind which the 21 year-old Matthias had been patiently and silently waiting.

Douglas Lockwood quotes Matthias' account of his capture: "I heard a noise and I saw this strange man. He had a big overall on and inside these I could see a big lump that told me it was a revolver. 'Japanese', I said to my friends, so we moved out into the thick bush around the camp and waited for him to come up. I crept up behind a tree and when he passed I put the handle of a tomahawk in his back and I say 'Hands up!'... We took off his clothing, everything except his underpants".<sup>8</sup>

Matthias took possession of the pilot's papers, map, camera and firearm, securing these valuable items high in a tree. Meanwhile he had called on three Tiwi men, Young Tiger, Big Barney and Paddy the Liar, to come and guard Toyoshima, nulla nullas at the ready.



Matthias himself held the pistol, the operation of which he had by this time mastered. It took until early next day to move the prisoner to Bathurst Island, Matthias spending a sleepless night guarding his captive. Upon arrival at the small village of Paru opposite the Bathurst Island mission settlement (now known as Nguiu), Toyoshima balked when he saw the American star on a wrecked DC-3, but a few jabs with a revolver soon urged him across the narrow Strait.

At the settlement, Toyoshima was handed over to Sergeant Les Powell of the 23rd Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers, who in turn passed him into the custody of Flying Officer Moore who commanded the RAAF barracks there. Matthias watched with some bemusement as his prisoner was taken into the barracks. "I could not understand it. They took the Jap inside and gave him a number one good tucker. I thought they would shoot him after what he did to Darwin".<sup>9</sup> He further commented, "All I could do was have a good laugh with Father McGrath when he rode up on a horse and said Yirri-Kiling-ar-par. That is, 'he has an ugly face'; his face and foot were badly cut when he landed in the bush".

Matthias later took RAAF technicians to Pickataramoor to examine the wreckage, and parts were removed for further study in Canberra. Other parts have subsequently been recovered by the Northern Territory Aviation Museum for local display.

Attempts to reward Matthias floundered in a sea of bureaucracy. Foremost in the attempt to see Matthias honoured was Doctor David Carment of Darwin when he was a member of the staff of the National Trust of Australia<sup>10</sup>, with the able assistance of Senator Bernie Kilgariff. Finding Canberra and the Commonwealth unwilling to honour Matthias on a national level he approached several politicians, eventually gaining support within the Territory.

The project was well supported by the Chief Minister of the time, the Honourable Paul Everingham, while his successor the Honourable Ian Tuxworth, enthusiastically followed it to its fruition. David remarked that he was most unfortunate not to have been present at the unveiling of the memorial, his work commitments precluding a flight to Bathurst Island.

The memorial, a ceramic totem standing on the grass verge at the gateway to Nguiu airstrip, was unveiled on 24 May 1985 with Brother John Pye MSC, a member of the

Catholic Missionaries of the Sacred Heart order and long-term resident of Bathurst Island, delivering the address:

"There is a trite saying or prayer 'God make the nice people good and the good people nice'. Matthias Ulungura, the man we are honouring today, was both good and nice. Added to that he was courageous. His courage has written a line in Australian history that can never be effaced."<sup>4</sup>

The NT News recorded the spectacle of the ceremony in which six Bathurst Island men performed the Bombing of Darwin dance: "The painted dancers – mimicking Japanese bombers with their arms spread and faces stern – thrilled hundreds of spectators ... The planes – in the dance – were all shot down. And the dancers played dead. And everyone laughed."

Matthias was not present at the ceremony. He had died in 1980 after a long battle with cancer. His wife Marie was present however, as were Mena and Aloysius Puantulura and their son Clarence. "The visitors can meet these people today and they can fill in on my effort," Brother Pye concluded.

Carr-Gregg notes that, once taken into captivity, the Japanese would refuse to volunteer their true rank and name as an indication of their withdrawal from society. Referring to the work of Goffman in asylums and other institutions, she considers that this process of 'self-annihilation' and 'role dispossession' was a means of saving their family and government great embarrassment. By falling captive or surrendering they had 'failed', so it was preferable that their personal details were not recorded, leaving their family and government with the belief that they had died honourably in battle instead of having breached the Military Field Code.

She further notes that "often the prisoners assumed the names of famous warriors or culture heroes to hide their real identity"<sup>11</sup>.

Once in the custody of the Australians, Toyoshima gave his name as Tadao Minami, telling his interrogators that he was a sergeant-major in the air force and had been an air gunner in a high level bomber from Ambon<sup>12</sup>. The name

Minami may have come from a famous Japanese leader during the Manchurian Incident a decade earlier in which the Kwantung Army invaded and occupied Manchuria. The commanders of this elite force, Generals Minami and Kanaya, engaged the Chinese on the night of 18 September 1931 without prior notification or approval from the government of Tokyo.

Indeed by the time Emperor Hirohito heard of this situation in China he was faced with a fait accompli, the generals arguing that operational necessities had prompted action contrary to orders from Tokyo. They were of course reprimanded by the Emperor, but now Japan controlled Manchuria and the social, political and military ramifications of this action are well documented.

Toyoshima, in the guise of Tadao Minami, claimed his plane had caught fire and he had bailed out, swimming ashore to Bathurst Island. Lockwood found fault with this explanation, recording that "Minami's name is not included in the Japanese records of the action, nor was a prisoner captured on Bathurst Island ... at that time"<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, the first POW sent south from Darwin is listed in the records of the Australian War Memorial as Sergeant-Major Tadao Minami<sup>12</sup>, and it was under this name that he entered No.12 POW Camp at Cowra.

Upon the arrival of Sergeant-Major Kanazawa, Minami relinquished his position as camp leader, although he was still very prominent in the hierarchy of the camp. When told of the decision to move the private soldiers to Hay, Carr-Gregg records that it was Minami who complained to the commandant: "Very bad business. Why can't we all go?"<sup>13</sup> Back in their huts they held a midnight conference, Minami and Kanazawa inspiring their countrymen to revolt, with Minami calling them to arms with his bugle on the morning of 5 August.

The leader of both the Pearl Harbor and Darwin raids, Mitsuo Fuchida, later revealed to Douglas Lockwood that he had broken radio silence to advise his admiral of their success and also to report Toyoshima's



Hajime Toyoshima (AWA P00022.001)



Zero pilot Hajime Toyoshima, who signaled the Cowra breakout

crash on Melville Island. It is a little known fact that the Japanese actually came ashore on Australian soil at this time, a floatplane landing a rescue party who were unable to locate the pilot<sup>14</sup>. It is interesting to reflect that had Toyoshima made for the coast, his chances of rescue would have been far greater and subsequent events may have been vastly different. Toyoshima died under the name of Tadao Minami – he was shot three times during the Cowra melee and, while wounded, took his life in the traditional ritual of hara-kiri so that his honour might be preserved and his family and government not disgraced.

### Pickataramoor revisited

The location of Toyoshima's crash site on Melville Island today remains unclear. Conservation Commission workers based at Pickataramoor vary in their opinions as to its whereabouts but none have actually seen any wreckage, although they acknowledge that little would remain after many years of tropical humidity and rain and regular burning-off.<sup>14</sup>

Two Tiwi workers from Pularumpi (Garden Point) also know of Matthias' bravery and of the aircraft, but again the site of the site is unknown. Some place it towards the south-eastern tip of the island some 8km from Pickataramoor along a ridge which terminates at Notch Peak: here, regular burning-off would have reduced the Zero to little more than rubble. Others have placed the site further north near Danyaru – a small settlement on the Tjipripu River, a suggestion which seems more credible as this is not far from Tuyu Creek, near which was during the 1939-45 war the Aboriginal settlement known as Tuyu.

From this area, Toyoshima could have moved in a southerly direction some 15km, being captured a short distance from the settlement of Tuyu, now a forestry reserve and pine plantation. Searches of the area on two occasions failed to locate aircraft debris, although the dense vegetation of the island may have long ago engulfed the wreckage obscuring it from all but the most proximate observer.

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### Notes

1. Long (1963) p.624.
2. Carr-Gregg (1978) p.70.
3. Timms (1946) p.178.
4. Long (1963) p.624.
5. Wigmore (1963) pp 283-284.
6. Lockwood (1966) p.183.
7. NT News 25 May 1985.
8. Lockwood (1966) p.183.
9. Brother J. Pye, MSC, Pers.Comm. 5 Sept 1986.
10. Dr D.S. Carment, BA Hons, PhD, currently foundation member of the University College of the Northern Territory (History Department), Pers. Comm. 8 Dec 1986.
11. Carr-Gregg (1978) p.35.
12. Lockwood (1966) pp 220-221.
13. Commonwealth Archives Office, Canberra AA1973/254 p.6, in Carr-Gregg (1978) p.69.
14. Lockwood (1966) p.221.

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