

THE SINKING OF THE PATRICIA CAM

NARRITJIN'S STORY

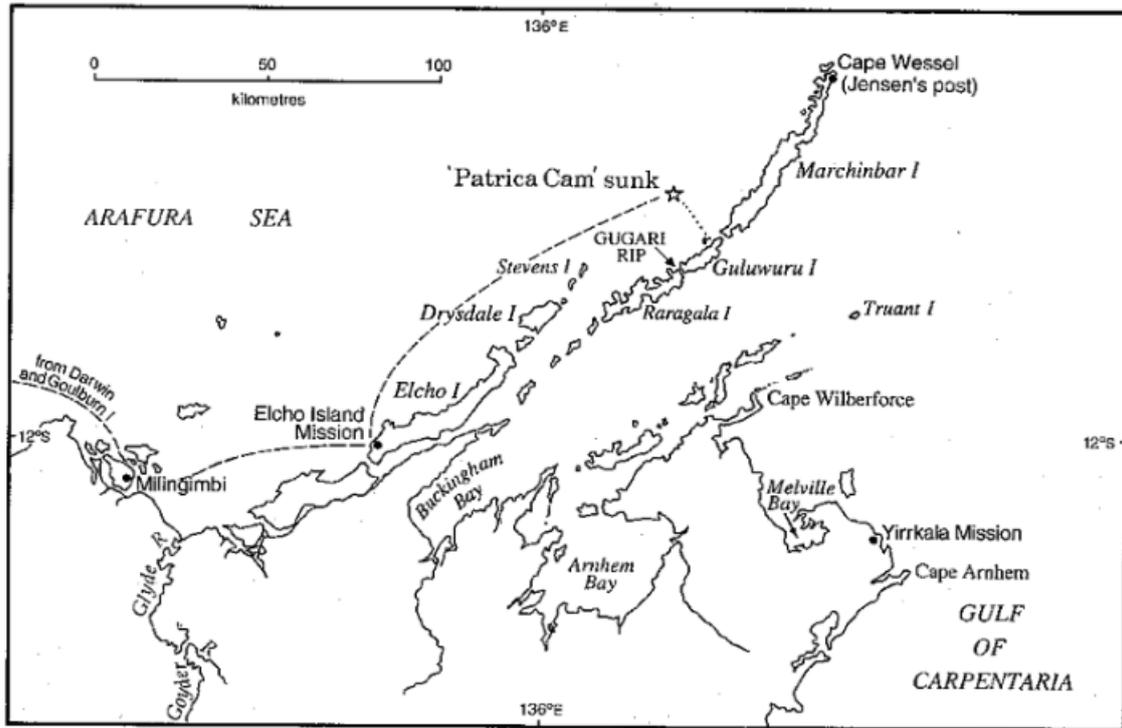
As told to Jeremy Long

In 1942 and 1943 the Arnhem Land coast was a forward combat area and shipping along the coast often came under attack from Japanese aircraft, mostly float planes operating from bases in the Aru and Tanimbar Islands, north of Darwin. Darwin itself was frequently attacked by Japanese bombers and fighters, while RAAF aircraft based in Darwin were raiding Timor, Ambon and other island bases to the north. Supply vessels sailing between Thursday Island and Darwin normally had a corvette escort, but local supply boats to the missions and coastwatch stations were generally not escorted.

The official war history records that HMAS Patricia Cam, an auxiliary minesweeper of 301 tons, was sunk off the Wessel Islands by a Japanese float plane on 22 January 1943 (1). On 13 January the ship had left Darwin where it had been based since April 1942, serving '*as a general purpose vessel, used mainly for carrying stores to outlying stations on the north and west coasts*'. On board were two officers and seventeen ratings, Lieutenant A.C. Meldrum commanding. The ship called at Goulburn Island where the Reverend Leonard N. Kentish came on board so that he could visit the other mission stations at Milingimbi, Elcho Island and Yirrkala. Kentish was both the missionary in charge at Goulburn Island and the chairman of the district for the Methodist Church. The Patricia Cam stopped overnight at Milingimbi on 20 January and next day called at Elcho Island. When it sailed from there early on Friday 22 January, for Jack Jensen's coastwatching station on Marchinbar Island, five Aboriginal men were also aboard as passengers.

Harold Thornell, who was in charge of the Yirrkala mission at the time, has told how, on 13 January, he had 'sent three Aborigines, Narritjin, Gitjbapuy and Djimanboi in a native canoe to collect the mail from Elcho Island.² Lieutenant Meldrum offered to carry the men and the canoe back to Yirrkala and the canoe was roped on at the stem. Two other Aboriginal men had evidently also accepted free passages to Yirrkala.

The narrative that follows was written in about 1967 when I had interviewed Narritjin in Darwin about his wartime experiences and in particular the sinking of the Patricia Cam. The late Narritjin Maymuru, of Yirrkala and Djarakbi (Cape Shield), was probably about 30 years old at the time of the sinking and in his mid-fifties when he told me the story. The words used are not his but the story is all his: the facts are recorded as he gave them in answer to my questions. Additional information drawn mainly from the official war history account of the incident is given in parenthesis I have similarly added some details from Thornell's account of the story Narritjin told when he returned to Yirrkala in February 1943 his account has far more detail about the bombing of the vessel than Narritjin gave me, but much less about Narritjin's efforts to get help for the survivors.



Narritjin's Story:

The boat left Elcho Island mission about 6 o'clock in the morning.³ When they had breakfast they were still off Elcho Island. The plane came about dinnertime [1.30 p.m.). [Thornell wrote that '*the three natives and Len Kentish were sitting on the middle hatch, Len learning some words of the Aborigines language to increase his vocabulary*'.⁴]

On the first run the plane dropped a bomb, which sank the boat: it dropped another bomb on a second run and it made three runs firing a machine gun. Some were killed, including Djalalingba's two brothers, Djnipula and Djimanbuy, and others were wounded. [Ordinary Seaman N.G. Penglase went down with the ship; Able Seaman ED. Nobes was killed, along with the two Aboriginal men, by the second bomb.) [Thornell recorded how Narritjin was '*temporarily knocked out*' after the first bomb and then found himself trapped under floating wreckage and a canvas awning, in which he was able to tear a hole with his teeth to escape being dragged under as the ship sank. Apparently some minutes elapsed between the first and the second bomb. Narritjin told Thornell that he and Kentish swam to the still floating stern section in try to free the canoe and the ship's boat. The boat was damaged but Kentish threw '*overboard drums, planks, boxes – anything that would float*'. Narritjin freed the canoe and got it into the water, then paddled over to pick up his two companions. Some of the crewmen tried to get in the canoe but then the second bomb exploded close by, wrecking the canoe and killing a number of men, including one Aborigine, and wounding others.⁵]

All were in the sea when the plane landed. Mr Kentish and Narritjin were hanging on to two small drums and were closest to the plane. They could not see the captain of the vessel. They swam closer. '*Japanee. soon as we two fella come close, tried to shoot*'. They ducked behind the drums and bullets glanced off. The Japanese reloaded and was starting to shoot again but Mr Kentish and Narritjin put up their hands. He dropped his revolver.

The Japanese let down a ladder and Mr Kentish climbed up. They shut the door, calling our 'Goodbye to Narritjin in English and the plane took off [Howard Morphy writes⁶ that Narritjin told him that he was pushed away from the plane by a Japanese boot'.]

All this time the other men had been a long way off Narritjin swam about six or eight hundred metres to a barge where the other men were gathered. They put Narritjin on the barge for a rest.

All that afternoon and all night they swam and drifted, taking turns to rest on the barge, but the wounded, including Gitjbapuy and two white men, were left on the barge all the time.

Before daylight they heard birds and got ashore on an islet at the north end of Guluwuru Island [3.30 a.m.]. All lay down on the shore exhausted. Narritjin got up and made a fire and gathered them all around it to dry. There were ten or twelve white men. [Thornell recorded that *'a pumpkin floated in from the sea and was gladly seized and cooked in a drum, a portion being given to everyone'*.] Then Narritjin went to look for bush tucker - wild fruit - and at low tide he took them down and showed them how to get oysters. With Narritjin there was another Aboriginal, Babawun, a brother of Gitjbapuy. In the afternoon they dug a grave for one white man who had died. Later Gitjbapuy also died and next morning another white man died and another grave was dug. The official history records that two crewmen, Chief Engine Room Artificer W.R. Moffitt and Ordinary Seaman A.A. Johnston, last seen at dusk on 22 January clinging to some wreckage, failed to get ashore and that only Stoker P.J. Cameron and 'a third native' died after reaching the shore.]

Narritjin showed the men how to get food and stayed for about two days minding them. But nobody came and Narritjin decided to leave and get help. He showed them what foods they could eat raw what they could cook and eat. Narritjin and Babawun walked south west down Guluwuru Island and swam the strait (Gugari Rip) between it and Raragala Island. He found a canoe but left it and went on to a bay where he found the owner Dika, a Galpu man and his son Militjbi. They sent the son back to get the other canoe and to go and help look after the parry. He then took some of the men up to Jensen's post. [The history records that on 25 January Lieutenant Meldrum *'set off with some natives by canoe for Marchinbar where, after walking 25 miles barefooted, he reached Jensen's coastwatching station at 9pm on the 26th'*.

Thornell wrote that a 'smoke fire' attracted the attention of 'two natives in a canoe' who were then sent 'to Wessell (sic) Island to get Jensen to radio for help.⁸]

Meanwhile, Narritjin and Dika took a canoe down to Djeergaree Island where they camped. Next day they crossed so the south east shore of Drysdale Island and on to the north end of Elcho Island where they met a large parry including Baradjuna, Yambi and many others. With some of these men Narritjin walked the length of Elcho Island to the missionary station, and reported the sinking to Mr Shepherdson the missionary worker in charge there through the war years. Narritjin remained for about two weeks at Elcho Island mission and then took a canoe across to Melville Bay, going around Cape Wilberforce and south to Dundas Point, where he left the canoe and walked to the Yirrkala mission.

The official history records that, when Meldrum reached Jensen's post, Jensen 'sent natives with food, first-aid kit and other items to the island and a message was telerradioed to Darwin next morning.⁹

Kuru [a former Northern Territory patrol vessel, serving as a naval tender] rescued the survivors at 8 p.m. on the 29th, and landed them at Darwin at 10 a.m. on 1st February.' The Reverend Kentish, it was later learned, was executed by the Japanese at Dobo in the Aru Islands on 5 February 1943.¹⁰

1. Gill 1968:265-6.
2. Thornell 1986:134.
3. Thornell's account has the Patricia Cam leaving Elcho at 11 p.m. on 21 January (Thornell 1986:137); Maisie McKenzie's history of the Methodist Missions in Arnhem Land has it sailing at midnight (McKenzie 1976:140); but the other accounts support Narritjin's recollection that it sailed early in the morning of the 22nd.
4. Thornell 1986:137
5. Ibid:137-8.
6. Personal communication. 22 February 1988.
7. Thornell 1986:140.
8. Ibid.
9. Gill 1968:266.
10. Ibid. McKenzie writes that Kentish was taken to the Aru islands in April and beheaded on 4 May (McKenzie 1976:142). See Thornell 1986:138.9 for his speculations on the reasons for the capture and execution of the Reverend Kentish.

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