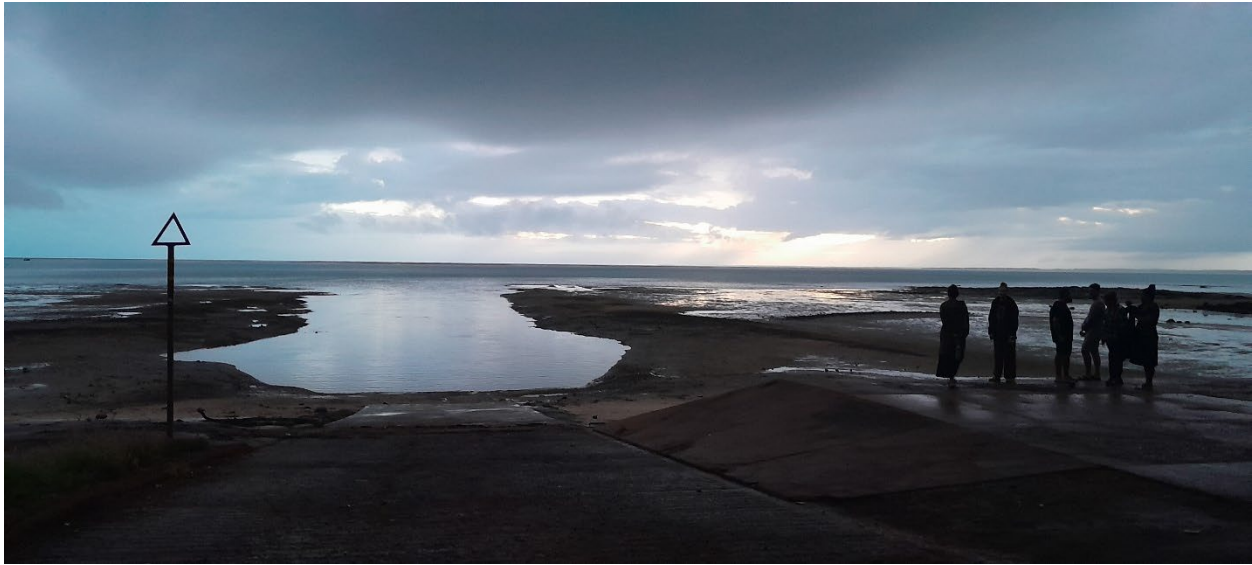


## Fear Drive My Feet



Dawn Service Milingimbi, 2023

In 1970s Lae the physical carnage of war lay all around us. Physical evidence of the scale of the war in the form of army ducks, trucks, planes, ammunition lay like dead bodies all over the landscape. Bullets and dangerous grenades would frequently be found. Unexploded bombs would regularly kill or maim those who were unlucky enough to step on them.

I was in my teens and my imaginary was filled with thoughts of war. There was the famous Japanese field hospital tunneled into “hospital hill” that was visible from the mainstreet of Lae and bombed ships were still visible in the harbour, at the end of the airport runway, slowly slipping down into the depths as earthquakes slowly edged them downwards.. The shoreline was shallow and then plunged hundreds of metres. By the time my family left the town in 1972 most of the ships were no longer visible.

At night beneath the beating roof fans I read Peter Ryan’s *Fear Drive My Feet* the story of his eighteen months as an 18 year old coast watcher, alone reporting Japanese shipping movements with the assistance of PNG villagers. I spent a lot of time in the jungle with Mumeng villagers of the Bulolo valley swimming in the rivers and walking the mountain trails occasionally finding crashed planes or other war relics.

My childhood gave me awareness of the sheer scale of WWII. It was such a monumental effort that much of the machinery was just left in the jungle and could never be recovered. It seemed almost unbelievable and miraculous all at the same time. The waste, the monumental scale and enormity seemed inconceivable.

My grandfather Eric spent much of the war in PNG. When I came south to boarding school I would stay weekends with Poppa and my Nana Ivy. I sometimes asked him about his war. He would say little and if I remember rightly he did not care much for ANZAC day. I had his medals for a long time as a kid but I think my mother spirited them away at some point. Pop came back from war and worked for many years at AV Jennings as a builder but the stress of the war cut short his life. I remember him visiting the famous Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital. The house in Doncaster was also still very much a war time house where my father and his brothers and sisters had lived on the canned peaches and fruit that my grandmother

carefully prepared and stored in great numbers on the kitchen shelves. I picked up the habit and there is something reassuring about canned fruits on shelves in farm kitchens.

Flying into Milingimbi, as with Lae in the 1970s, the relics of war are still in evidence. Like Broome, Darwin, Gove, Hopevale/Cooktown and hundreds of other airstrips up and down the Stuart Highway Milingimbi was a major fuel stop for bombers. It was bombed and strafed in May 1943 and HMAS Maroubra was sunk by Japanese Zeros on 10 May 1943.

These holidays I devoured Bob Baker's marvellous compilation **The Spear and the Gun Japanese Attacks on Arnhem Land A Wartime History of Milingimbi 1942-1945**. Written with the support of his wife Djandjay, daughter of the famous leader Harry Makarrwala who was the anthropologist Charles Warner's major supporter for his pioneering work **Black Civilisation** (1937), **The Spear and the Gun** puts all the records of the war years and the early mission together.

As in PNG there was a remarkable force of Yolngu and Australian military personnel deployed along the Arnhem coast line and in the Wessel and English Company Islands as coast watchers and to man radar stations. My dhuway Mrs P.B. Burrarwanga told me at Mata Mata that a group of Yolngu on the Wessel Islands shot down several Japanese planes with a heavy machine gun at night. The story went that the Yolngu could see the Japanese planes at night when European soldiers could not. But there are no records of these war time exploits in the official records. Hopefully one day there will be some effort made to record the war time service of the Yolngu soldiers.

Bob Baker records Donald Thomson's Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit's 51 Yolngu members and some of its remarkable members including Raiwala "the greatest single combat fighter in Arnhem land". These men were prepared to take on Japanese guns and planes with spears and know how and several pilots owe their survival to the Yolngu unit.

Bob also records the extraordinary war time contribution of the missionaries including the Fijian pastor Kolinio Saukuru who deserves more recognition for his war time contribution during perilous times as an accomplished navigator and captain who saved many lives. He was 6ft 9 inches and had the strength to lift a full 44 gallon drum of fuel. His son and grand children currently attend Milingimbi School. They say that like my grand father Eric, Kolinio said little of his war time experiences.

Bob also records the bombing and sinking of the **Patricia Cam** in which my wawa's mother's brother Gitjipapuy Marrkulu was killed by a Japanese sea or float plane. The great Yolngu painter Narritjin Maymuru survived this attack. However the much respected missionary Rev Len Kentish was taken prisoner and later executed.

These legendary and tragic exploits feel like they happened yesterday in Milingimbi where time feels like it has stood still. But what sits with me after a life of PNG and northern Australian friendships with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is that there is still much to write about these times. There is much to be written about the Yolngu coast watchers and other units. In 1942 and what would be the prequel to the town of Hopevale, the original Aboriginal houses of Cape Bedford, (Hope Valley community) were burned down by American soldiers because of the German Lutheran Mission, and the residents were removed with terrible consequences to Woorabinda west of Rockhampton – more than 28 people died of pneumonia and other causes. Bob Baker's second book, a sequel to **The Spear and the Gun** is something to look forward to.

The other thing that sits with me is that despite the heroic efforts of Australian and New Zealanders without the Americans our war against the Japanese could not have been won.

The hundreds of 44 gallon drums in the bush at Milingimbi that were used to refuel hundreds of air missions all have the stamp USAF on the bottom.

As we consider the AUKUS strategic alliance and the new rearrangement of our military forces across the North of Australia it is well to remember that more than 30 million soldiers and civilians were killed in the Pacific theater during the course of the war, compared with 15 million to 20 million killed in Europe. Peace at all costs, but also let us never be unprepared for war in our region again and on our northern door step again.

### **References**

Peter Ryan, **Fear Drive My Feet**, MUP, (1959)

Bob Baker, **The Spear and the Gun Japanese Attacks on Arnhem Land A Wartime History of Milingimbi 1942-1945**, Avonmore Books, 2017