

## Foreword

The seizure of the Rev. Len Kentish by the crew of a Japanese float-plane in the Arafura Sea on 22 January 1943 and his later execution in the Aru Islands is one of the most shocking acts of a war permeated by violence against helpless civilians. As Noel Kentish's moving book relates, his father's abduction from the floating wreckage left after the plane's crew had sunk the supply vessel HMAS *Patricia Cam* came as a shock to the other survivors, and it was to bring repercussions and consequences to a host of people – Australian, Japanese and Indonesian – for years to come.

The most severely affected were, of course, Len Kentish's widow, Vi, and his children, Noel, Elaine and Claire. Evacuated from the Northern Territory and living in Brisbane, they only learned of Len's fate after the war's end, and then only through Vi's own efforts. Vi and her children lived for the rest of their lives with the trauma of their husband and father's abduction, and with the knowledge of the cruel and utterly unwarranted manner of his death.

Noel Kentish's book tells a powerful story, one of faith and love overshadowed, though not extinguished, by acts of bastardry almost unique in the Australian experience of war. Len Kentish was one of a small number of Australian civilians to be killed directly by the Japanese during the Pacific war. They included the civilians who died in the bombing of Darwin and other places in northern Australia, and merchant seamen who died when their ships were torpedoed off its coast. A small handful of Australian missionaries in Papua New Guinea shared his fate, executed by the Japanese. Their stories deserve to be told, by others. But Len Kentish was the only person to be taken within sight of his homeland, abruptly, inexplicably. As a missionary he knew nothing of any military value – Noel conjectures, surely rightly, that his age and the fact that he was the only survivor of the *Patricia Cam* wearing a shirt, explained why he was chosen. Tragically, having lost his hearing aid, he probably understood nothing of the questions put to him in the fortnight before he died. His was truly a pointless death, bringing nothing but tragedy to all affected, perpetrators and victims alike.

Noel Kentish, having lived with the knowledge of this story for practically his whole life, has now bravely and honestly recorded it. Formerly a detail in the complex history of Australia's part in the Pacific war – covered by a couple of paragraphs in official history of the Royal Australian Navy – the full story can now at last be placed before Australians 75 years on. Dr Kentish writes from a profound knowledge of his parents' lives and of minute and telling details. What he cannot know – what no one can now know – especially of his father's ordeal while starving, maltreated captive living in silence, uncomprehending of what his captors were saying or doing, he has imagined. His reconstruction and speculation enhances rather than detracts from the bare facts of the historical record, which he has sought out diligently and has interpreted sensitively. Len Kentish's tragic story, and the story of his family, can now be told in full.

One final injustice remains. Some 27,000 Australians died in the war against Japan. All but a handful are commemorated by name in the cloisters of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, or on the memorial to merchant sailors in its grounds. Other civilians – those who died as civilian internees, or in bombing raids, or the missionaries like Len Kentish – remain unacknowledged by the Australian government, even though they died directly at the hands of the Japanese. (In Len Kentish's case *literally* at the hands of a Japanese.) In 1946 it fell to

Len's Methodist church colleagues to tell Vi Kentish of her husband's death, and it took a further eight years before she eventually gained a pension commensurate with those awarded to the widows of other Australians, members of the armed services, who died in the war. That official apathy sadly continues. It would be fitting if one day Len Kentish's name, and those of his fellow civilians who died in the Pacific war, could be acknowledged in the national memorial to Australia's war dead. For Len Kentish is indeed one of Australia's war dead.

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