



SANTA'S SLEIGH WAS A WIRRAWAY

by Bob Piper

A20-410

While acting as Santa Claus to frontline troops at Bougainville in 1944 two Australian airmen were forced to crash-land their Wirraway on a remote jungle ledge.

Flight Lieutenant Gilbert Cory and Flying Officer Bill Tucker, with the assistance of the famous New Guinea coastwatcher Lieutenant Paul Mason (RANVR) and his band of native commandos, managed to elude capture and return safely a fortnight later.

It all started when No. 5 Squadron decided on a Christmas surprise for frontline troops around the Torokina perimeter and some Australian Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) personnel patrolling beyond it. Bins placed around the Headquarters at Piva Strip were quickly filled as personnel enthusiastically contributed puddings, cakes, cigarettes, books and packs of cards. To this was added the latest mail from home.

The scheme worked well and some two Jeep loads were eventually received. On Christmas morning it was sorted out and packed in three "storepedoes" for dropping. Someone sketched a Santa Claus and a few greetings on the containers.

A group of men stood around to see the Wirraway cum sleigh away. Suddenly a photographer snapped a picture and that, according to Gil Cory, was the cause of all the trouble. Both he and Bill Tucker were both superstitious about being photographed before taking off. Despite bad weather, and the ill omen already placed on them, the pair departed in aircraft A20-410 at 10.45 a.m.

Gil puffed away on an old pipe, his squadron trademark, as he headed up a valley. Clouds soon pressed him down to only twenty feet above treetops that hid the knife-edged ridges of Bougainville's hinterland.

Suddenly, while at 4,500', the engine began to lose power. The best Gil could get was 15 inches of boost. When just on the point of stall he set the Wirraway down on a small ledge only sixty by thirty feet. Both

wings were torn off and the engine was twisted sideways, but the plane, luckily, didn't burn. Cory had done a magnificent job. Five feet lower and they would have gone right into the side of the hill.

In the impact the radio set fell back and gashed Bill's legs but, apart from being shaken up, he was otherwise unharmed. Bill called out to Cory in the front, who at first didn't answer because he was stunned. The pilot also had cut legs and hurt ribs. (Later they were to discover he had four broken ribs.) Finally Gil answered "I'll be okay, you get away in case she burns." Bill, however, stayed and with a combined effort Cory was freed from the wreckage, climbed out and sat down.

Almost immediately both heard voices so they crawled fifty metres into the jungle and hid. People were calling out and one had a high pitched voice, which the airmen thought was Japanese, so the pair continued to lay low. Then both heard quite clearly: "Mister America, me prend." Moving quietly to the edge of the scrub the Australians counted seventeen natives and not a sign of the enemy amongst them.

The RAAF men now revealed their presence and learnt that one of the natives named Joseph, who saw the crash, was mission educated and spoke Pidgin English. He explained that the survivors were only 200 yards from his village, MOAU, and that there was a "Mister Mission" a few miles away.

Cory wrote a short note which was sent with two runners to the mission. A reply was received several hours later from Paul Mason, the famous coastwatcher, which told the airmen where they were and that the local people could be relied upon. Mason's letter also explained that he was presently busy with a large party of Chinese, whom he had rescued from Kieta, and that the group was being pressed by the Japanese.

In the meantime Cory's ribs were strapped up with bandages made from parachutes. At the same time the contents of the storepedoes were piled neatly beside the wrecked plane. Wide-eyed warriors and

small boys surveyed in awe the tins of cake, puddings and talcum powder. Presents from heaven.

Bill and Cory invited the onlookers to help themselves. The "monkeys" (teenage boys) spread toothpaste over their smiling faces and women sprinkled white powder over their curly hair.

The aircrew didn't attempt to burn their Wirraway. Smoke from the fire would almost certainly have brought the enemy to investigate. In its remote jungle position it was doubtful the plane would be stumbled on by Japanese troops.

As the native men prepared to carry the injured flier up the nearby 500 foot cliff to their village Bill entertained the women and children by removing and replacing his false teeth; the first they had ever seen.

At the village the Kukuri (headman) of the area arrived. He was tall, broad shouldered, and soon took charge. Cory and Tucker dined on sweet potato baked in banana leaves followed by desert from the undelivered Christmas hampers.

That evening Joseph conducted a church service in Pidgin and prayed for the RAAF men's deliverance. The hymn O GOD OUT HELP IN AGES PAST was melodiously sung by the natives in their own language. So passed Christmas Day 1944.

Meanwhile, back at No. 5 Squadron, there were long faces. Two popular members had not returned. They were obviously down, possibly injured or dead and no one knew exactly where. Wirraways and Avro Ansons searched fruitlessly for hours. Finally all were forced to return as the weather closed in for the afternoon. The RAAF's Christmas gesture to the Army was now believed to have ended in a tragic climax.

Next day the New Guineans brought more food and mothered the injured men. They were afraid, however, that the Japanese might come looking for

them so on the second night the Wirraway crew were taken to another hut in a more secluded spot.

They remained with these natives for five days, until 30 December, and during that period Cory and Bill were fed and cared for like children and never left unguarded for a moment of the day or night.

On several occasions "bush wireless" informed them the Japanese were within four miles of their position on a food scavenging expedition, so the natives dispersed twelve of their number as advantageously as possible. They were armed with bows and arrows, four captured Japanese rifles and hand grenades. With their superlative jungle knowledge they shrewdly planned against every contingency. Sentries were posted at vital spots, scouts sent forward and escape tracks and hideouts prepared.

Very early in the war the natives had discovered that the Japanese troops pushed their vicious, long-barbed arrows through their bodies to minimise

fashioned in the stem so it would break off if the enemy attempted to remove it. Bill Tucker, on learning of the new model, promptly dubbed it the "Mark IV".

Good bow strings were precious to the natives so Cory told them they could have the control cables of the crashed Wirraway. They selected only their best bows for fitting, the weapons being kept for protection in banana leaves coated with pig fat.

At 10.45 a.m. on Wednesday 28 December the pair saw a smokey blue, twin-engined aircraft travelling north 3000 feet above them. Its speed was estimated at between 320-380 mph and from the silhouette it was most certainly a Japanese DINAH (high speed photo-reconnaissance aircraft).

On the evening of 30 December Cpl White (AIB) arrived with two police boys from Mason's party. The next day the RAAF airmen, accompanied by several native carriers from the village, were taken to the coastwatcher's camp at the head of the Luluai River. Altogether the trip took six hours walking through thick jungle, along ill-defined trails and scrambling up steep ridges.

During 2 January 1945 two Wirraways, flown by Flying Officers Glassop and Reynolds, dropped four storepedoes filled with supplies. The delivery was made under very bad conditions with low cloud and poor visibility. Never the less the aircraft bored right in and released their cargo directly on top of Cory and Tucker. All the supplies were safely retrieved.

The following day the airmen set off for base (it was Bill's birthday) with Cpl White, his two boys and 14 native carriers. They passed through LAMPARON, crossed the Jaba River about halfway down its course and passed through QUANAI (which was a large cave). From there the pair pushed on through low swampy country until 6 January when they reached the 2/8th Cavalry Commando advanced headquarters on the Tekessi River.

From this position the RAAF airmen travelled down the river, in a collapsible boat with an outboard motor, to Brigade HQ on the coast. Then by Brigadier Monaghan's launch to Torokina.

Flight Lieutenant Gilbert Richard Isler Cory was later awarded the DFC for his "high character, flying

ability, enthusiasm and energy during operations and training as the second-in-charge with No. 5 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron.

Post war Cory did little flying and today runs his property, "Glentanna", at Dalveen in Queensland. He was a contributor both in information and photos for this story.

Flying Officer W.H. Bill Tucker, a schoolteacher from Bundaberg, Queensland, passed away in the 1960's.

Lieutenant Paul Mason, a former Bougainville plantation manager, survived the war as one of the South West Pacific's most famous coastwatchers. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by both the Australians and Americans. His Australian citation read "for gallantry, skill and outstanding devotion to duty in special operations in the Far East. (He died in Brisbane on 1st January, 1973 and his ashes were returned to Inus Plantation on Bougainville to be interred with a special memorial.)" □



*Flt. Lt. Gilbert Cory
D.F.C. (left) and
Flg. Off. Bill Tucker
with some
Japanese souvenirs
from their
adventure —
January, 1945.*