

# A Small South Pole

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*The Japanese successfully play back a radio agent from down under.*

The history of hasty Allied blunders that made the obscure and innocuous Portuguese colony of eastern Timor a victim of World War II <sup>1</sup> has an appropriately dismal sequel in the hitherto untold story of an intelligence operation attempted by the Allies after their invasion of the neutral zone had led to Japanese occupation. Apparently none of the participants has ever set down his recollections of the ensuing Japanese counterintelligence coup and its exploitation for almost two years, but an account of the main events can be pieced together from official records.

In mid-1942 the Japanese were in control of the Timorese capital, Dili, and the coasts; but westward, toward the border with Dutch Timor, remnants of the Australian and Dutch invading forces were still holding out with guerrilla operations. To work with these and to provide intelligence on the occupation forces, a party code-named LIZARD was introduced on 17 July by the Inter-Allied Services Department, a reconnaissance group which had been formed the preceding March and had just come under MacArthur's control as part of the Allied Intelligence Bureau, created on 6 July.<sup>2</sup> By February 1943, however, what remained of the Dutch troops had surrendered, and the last of the Australians, along with LIZARD, were evacuated by submarine. In April the ISD was liquidated. A new body called first Special Operations Australia and then Services Reconnaissance Department was formed.

# Birth of Lagarto

Among those evacuated on 10 February 1943 by the U.S. submarine *Gudgeon* were a sergeant of the 2/4 Australian Independent Company (commandos), A. J. Ellwood, and a Portuguese army pilot who had been the administrator of a large Timorese province, Lt. M. de J. Pires. Early the following summer Lt. Pires was placed in charge of a four-man team under the auspices of the SRD to go back to Timor with the mission of arranging the evacuation of a group of 100-odd refugees, of maintaining morale among the Timorese and the Portuguese not evacuated, of establishing an informant net to cover enemy movements, and of reporting by radio on all enemy activities. As radio operator he had a civilian who had run the Dili radio station before the war, Patricio Luz. The other two members of his team were Portuguese NCO's.

Code-named LAGARTO, Pires' team was landed by American submarine on 1 July 1943, with the assistance of some of the refugees awaiting evacuation, at the mouth of the Luca River. A heavy sea was running, and three radio sets were lost; but on the following day Luz nevertheless established the contact with SRD in Melbourne that was regularly maintained thereafter. In about a month LAGARTO's first mission, the evacuation, had been arranged, and 87 Portuguese, Timorese, and Cantonese men, women, and children were taken out. The rest joined the espionage team.

At this time Sgt. Ellwood also joined the team as a sort of Australian liaison officer. A communications man, he had his own ciphers to communicate independently with the SRD, and Lt. Pires was directed to consult him on all matters and to clear all messages with him. Pires, anxious to minimize Australian participation in his proud services to Portugal and resentful of the authority given a sergeant, ignored this directive. SRD initiated a commission for Ellwood, but his lieutenancy came through too late to be of any use, when he and Pires had long since been separated. It was only by striking up a friendship with Luz that Ellwood could keep track of Pires' messages to Melbourne.

The natives in the area turned out to be unfriendly and assisted the Japanese, so from the very beginning LAGARTO was continually harassed and forced to keep on the move. Moreover, Ellwood reported,

the team had grown to the unwieldy size of 34, including Pires' mistress and the pregnant comrade-in-arms of another Portuguese. Melbourne repeatedly asked Pires to cut the party down, but it was not until late September, when the team had gradually lost all its rations and spare arms and ammunition, that he got it down to eight, still including his mistress. When things became critical he requested an evacuation, but too late; the Japanese were now closing in.

On 29 September 1943 natives completely surrounded the party and stood guard until the Japanese came up. Ellwood, without dry matches, couldn't burn his cipher and other papers, but he scooped out a hole in the sand and buried them. Luz and two others managed to get away, the latter for only a few days, Luz for the duration; SRD heard from him through Portuguese consular channels in December 1945. The rest were loaded into a truck and taken to Dili to a military jail. There Ellwood, kept tied and handcuffed, could hear the cries and screams of the others, but he never saw any of them again. He himself was alternately questioned and beaten by four Japanese.

## **Nippon Takes Over**

The Japanese first got hold of Pires' emergency cipher. On 6 October they sent a message to SRD saying Luz had run away from LAGARTO. The same day, however, having found Ellwood's buried papers, they beat him into agreeing to operate his set. He was in such bad shape that a Japanese operator had to guide his hand to the transmitting key. His message gave a plausible position for LAGARTO and said they had been without food for three days. Melbourne replied with arrangements for a food drop and asked whether it was true that Luz had disappeared and who was operating. On 7 October Ellwood confirmed that Luz had run away and said that he was operating for Pires, who had also lost his cipher book.

SRD, all innocent of suspicion, thus began a series of supply drops that was to go on for 22 months. The Japanese would take Sgt. Ellwood to the drop zone and have him aim the signal lamp while they operated it from cover close by. For his cooperation Ellwood was finally allowed two sets of clothing, his mail, and one magazine per month from the drops.

The flow of messages from LAGARTO from this time on gave the impression that it was gradually getting on a friendly basis with the natives and establishing itself in the country.

It reported the team moving about for a time and then finally settling some 20 miles east of Dili, where it remained ostensibly unmolested until July 1945. A careful study of these purported early movements might have raised an eyebrow in Melbourne: the team was said to have retraced its steps into the very area where it had previously reported the natives most unfriendly and unwilling to help in any way. But SRD never even inquired how LAGARTO had managed to get itself out of the crisis it had reported just before capture.

## **Cobra Entrapped**

With LAGARTO apparently well established, SRD used it to protect the insertion of additional teams. Arrangements were made for the first of these, code-named COBRA, to be sent in on 29 January 1944. The Japanese took Ellwood with them to the entry point. Having obtained dry matches and materials to make a flash lamp, he intended to escape and warn the new team before it landed. He made a break, but his guard shouted to attract the attention of the other Japanese and he was soon recaptured, being ill with beri-beri. After a severe beating he was blindfolded, gagged and bound, and left without food or drink in the open for forty-eight hours. Then he was returned to Dili and put on a starvation diet that brought back his malaria and dysentery. He learned that the incoming team had been captured within an hour.

Melbourne, asking LAGARTO what happened to COBRA, gave it the code word COBRA was to use if it was in difficulty and the authenticator that would indicate it was safe and free of enemy control. With the help of this information the Japanese got the use of COBRA's communications and in a few days began sending messages over that channel also. A third team, sent in ten months after LAGARTO's advice about the entry point was asked, was apprehended within a few hours.

# The Play Ends

At the end of 1944 control of the teams passed to a Group D in SRD, established in Darwin at the Lugger Maintenance Station. The turnover was accompanied by no word or hint that anything might be wrong. A full counterintelligence review by Group D would not have been possible anyway: the message files of LAGARTO and COBRA were incomplete with respect to the early months of both. Melbourne, although asked to supply copies of the full files, would not or could not do so.

In April 1945, however, intercept intelligence reported that a copy of an AIB questionnaire dropped to both teams in January and February was in Japanese hands on Timor. A plan for relief of LAGARTO, which it was now suspected might also be known to the Japanese, was changed without informing the team, and the relief team leader was parachuted into the area two days before a scheduled supply drop. When the drop was made he observed from concealment that Ellwood was under guard at the drop zone. But it was now July, and by the time he made his way back to Australia the war was over.

On 21 August Ellwood was removed from his solitary confinement and taken to another prison, where he was housed with the leader of ill-fated COBRA, a Lt. Cashman. On 1 September 1945 all the surviving SRD prisoners were moved to Flores, Soembawa, Java, and Bali, where they were picked up by aircraft of the RAAF and flown to Singapore on 2 October.

The last messages had been sent over the COBRA and LAGARTO links on 12 August 1945. They read respectively:

FOR ACB FROM NIPPON. THANKS FOR YOUR INFORMATION THIS LONG WHILE. NIPPON ARMY.

NIPPON FOR LMS. THANKS YOUR ASSISTANCE FOR THIS LONG WHILE. HOPE TO SEE YOU AGAIN. UNTIL THEN WISH YOU GOOD HEALTH. NIPPON ARMY.

This operation carried out so successfully by the Japanese was on a much smaller scale than the similar North Pole deception achieved by

the Germans at the other end of the world.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence available that any information passed to the Australians by the Japanese over the compromised circuits did any lasting harm. Nevertheless, it meant the total cancellation of effective reconnaissance in this particular area and the fruitless expenditure of considerable equipment and personnel tied up in supporting the teams.

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1 See Thomas F. Conlon's "Portuguese Timor: An Estimative Failure" in *Intelligence Articles* IV 1, p. 91ff.

2 See Allison Ind's *Allied Intelligence Bureau*, reviewed in *Intelligence Articles* III 1, p. 135.

3 See Herman J. Giskes' *London Calling North Pole* (New York, 1953).

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