

Smirnoff and the diamond dogs of war

A mystery deepens as Broome remembers the Japanese attack

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TONY BARRASS

A LETTER by a civil engineer working in the Kimberley during World War II has thrown a new twist into one of Australia's enduring wartime mysteries – the disappearance of \$20 million in diamonds from a Dutch DC-3 shot down by Japanese Zeros north of Broome.

Norman Keys's handwritten account of a meeting with the surviving pilot, the legendary Captain Ivan Smirnoff, challenges for the first time the accepted belief that Smirnoff had no idea he was transporting diamonds, along with Dutch nationals fleeing Java from the invading Japanese, when his plane crash-landed at Carnot Bay 70 years ago today.

The letter, one of two written by Keys and uncovered in the Australian War Memorial archives in December by Curtin University researchers, comes as Broome this weekend commemorates the horrific Japanese attack on the remote northwest outpost, often overshadowed historically by the bombing of Darwin 12 days earlier.

In the March 3, 1942, raid, which claimed 88 lives – 20 of them children – 48 Dutch nationals died when Japanese navy Zeros strafed Catalina and Dornier flying boats full of evacuees from Netherlands East Indies as the planes sat in Roebuck Bay waiting to be refuelled.

Nineteen injured US servicemen also perished when a B24 Liberator Bomber was shot out of the sky and plunged into the sea 8km off Cable Beach. Leaving 22 destroyed Allied aircraft in their wake, the Zeros were heading back to base in Dutch Timor when they shot down Smirnoff's Douglas DC-3, Pelikaan, about 60km north of Broome. The Russian-born Smirnoff managed to land in shallow surf, but many of his passengers were badly injured.

Hours earlier, Smirnoff had

been instructed to take a mysterious cigar box-sized package as he prepared to taxi along the Bandung tarmac in Java, bound for Broome, then a strategic refuelling point for Allied aircraft and Qantas flying boats carrying out the aerial evacuation of Java. Smirnoff was told to guard the package carefully as it was of great value, but was not told of its contents. An official from the Commonwealth Bank in Australia would take possession of the box when he reached Australia. The diamonds belonged to two rich Dutch families who, along with both the Dutch and Australia, knew Java was about to fall.

In the four days that Smirnoff and his sick and dying passengers spent on the remote Kimberley beach, desperately searching for water and help, there was at least one attempt to retrieve the box from the damaged aircraft, but it washed out of the hands of one of Smirnoff's crew when a wave unexpectedly hit the Pelikaan. Four of the group died as they waited to be rescued, including an 18-month-old toddler, and were buried in the wet sandflats.

After again being attacked by a passing Japanese bomber that had picked up their position via a faint SOS call from the group's ramshackle radio, they were finally rescued by German Catholic missionaries from Beagle Bay, 60km or so north.

Smirnoff always claimed he had more important things to worry about than the package. His own account of the crash, published in 1947 nine years before he died in Majorca, Spain, details how, on his way to Sydney in the weeks after his rescue, he was approached by a "very correctly dressed" bank official in Melbourne and was stunned when told what was in the package. Smirnoff, who years earlier had knocked back a personal

approach from Cecil B. DeMille to make a film about his extraordinary life as a WWI flying ace, wrote: "He introduced himself as a director of the Commonwealth Bank. 'Is there something you want to hand over to me,' he asked me with some urgency. 'To hand over to you?' I replied rather clumsily. 'The packet which they gave you in Bandung. Where is the packet?'"

"Slowly it dawned on me. 'Lost in the battle,' I said, simply. I told him in brief words the history of our emergency . . . the banker appeared as white as a sheet. 'Well, what was in the packet?' I asked him with interest. I wondered in this same minute that I had not asked myself this question earlier.

"He then said in sombre tones: 'Nothing particular, nothing more than a few diamonds which had a value of 500,000 guilders.' I was absolutely taken aback."

But Keys's 1989 letter for the first time challenges Smirnoff's version of events. Keys spent the war building and repairing airports and landing strips in the Kimberley. After the attack on Broome, which he witnessed, he was asked to drive to Beagle Bay to bring four survivors of a crashed DC-3 back to Broome hospital.

He wrote: "When I arrived the four survivors were in a pretty bad way and Captain Smirnoff appeared to me to be delirious and kept repeating that he had to get back to the aircraft to pick up the diamonds. For a brief period we considered going back to the aircraft with some native guides, but it was decided that we had to get the survivors to hospital. . ."

Keys's son Graham, a Perth businessman, said his father always swore that Smirnoff knew the package in the Pelikaan was full of diamonds. "Dad always said the pilot knew there were diamonds there because when he was driving Smirnoff, who was pretty out of it, all the way back to



Broome, that's all the pilot was saying, 'I've got to get the diamonds, got to get back to the plane and get the diamonds' . . . that's all this poor man was saying." He added it was "pure supposition" to suggest Smirnoff may have been planning something more sinister.

Keys's widow, Joan, now 90, said her husband was suspicious of the events surrounding the case. "Norm always believed Smirnoff knew (about the diamonds) . . . he could never understand why Smirnoff denied knowing they were in the package in the plane."

Nonja Peters, whose curatorial team at John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library uncovered the letters while preparing for today's Broome commemoration, said the case of the missing diamonds was

just one chapter in the story of the Broome attack.

Norman Keys died aged 79 in 1994 after a career in engineering. The letters were among other personal items donated to the Australian War Memorial after his death.

So what became of the missing diamonds? A few weeks after the rescue of Smirnoff and his party, Jack Palmer, a dugong hunter and beachcomber, moored his lugger, Eurus, just off Carnot Bay after hearing a DC-3 had gone down. He and two Aborigines boarded the partly submerged plane looking to poach whatever they could, and stumbled across the package, among other things, and were gobsmacked when he opened it. Within days he had linked up with two other drifters, pearler Jim Mul-

grue and mechanic Frank Robinson. Criminal masterminds they were not, and over the next six months diamonds were being thrown around in pubs, across card tables and in two-up rings.

Eventually the three were arrested and in May 1943 they appeared in the Supreme Court in Perth. Smirnoff's evidence was expected to be crucial, but the dashing airman told prosecutors he could not remember what had happened to the diamonds. All three were eventually acquitted.

As for the diamonds, Dutch authorities estimated less than a third of the diamonds that made their way on to the Pelikaan 70 years ago today were retrieved.



Keys's handwritten account



AARON FRANCIS

Joan Keys, now 90, says her husband was suspicious about events surrounding the missing diamonds. 'Norm always believed Smirnoff knew,' she said this week