

Envoy Kawai punished for love of Australia and Curtin

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The Japanese diplomat who took home the remains of four submariners killed in the midget sub raid on Sydney Harbour in 1942 was ostracised in wartime Japan for his love of Australia.

A new history of Japan and Australia at war reveals previously unpublished information about the diplomat – Tatsuo Kawai, the first Japanese minister or ambassador to Australia.

Bob Wurth, author of *Saving Australia, Curtin's secret peace with Japan*, discovered Kawai's writing, poetry and life story in photographs in Japan during five years of research for the book.

The book reveals that Kawai, a strident expansionist when he arrived in Sydney in March 1941, fell under the spell of Labor's John Curtin and developed a life-long devotion to the Australian wartime leader.

Saving Australia says the two became friends during numerous meetings as the tension for war grew during 1942. Kawai's friend, the Melbourne Consul Tsuneo Hattori, later wrote that the two would "bare their hearts to each other" in deep conversation. In Japan, author Wurth interviewed Kawai's son, Masumi Kawai, former general manager of Mitsui Australia, who said of his father: "I don't know why he loved Australia, loved John Curtin and loved Elsie Curtin, but he did."

Kawai dined with the Curtins at their home at Cottesloe in Perth in July 1941 just as Japanese troops occupied southern Indochina in its southward advance. As the outbreak of war neared, Kawai and Curtin clashed over Western sanctions against Japan and the basing of Australian troops in Malaya.

Curtin told the Advisory War Council that Kawai had used intimidating language in threatening to smash the Western 'encirclement of Japan', as Japan's wartime leaders called it.

But the book says that as time went on, Kawai was increasingly charmed by the openness, honesty and lack of pretension of John Curtin, who became prime minister in October 1941. Kawai and Curtin, as Opposition leader, discussed ways of maintaining the peace between Japan and Australia and according to Kawai, Curtin agreed that he would encourage Japan to have access to iron ore mining at Yampi Sound in Western Australia if Japan would 'guarantee Australia's safety.'

Iron ore exports had been banned by the Lyons Government in 1938 and the agreement between Curtin and Kawai would never occur. But Kawai, writing years later, would warmly remember the offer:

I was deeply impressed by his attitude and character. From that moment my feelings of friendship towards him grew rapidly.

At the outbreak of war with Japan, Kawai was placed under house arrest at his “*Carn Brea*” mansion at Auburn in Melbourne along with 20 of his staff.

Kawai read of the midget submarine raid on Sydney Harbour in newspapers in late May which claimed six Japanese submariners. Two were never found. He was deeply moved by the bravery of the submariners when he received the ashes of four of them at his Melbourne home:

*This clumsy surprise attack failed:
they died
fighting with the enemy;
astonishing*

*Pray!
Just pray!
Without uttering a single word
they walk into the jaws of death*

*A main section of the boat is destroyed
people perish peacefully*

*Bullets and blades
bloodshed and death:
now I know exactly how easy it is to die*

*Mid-winter
know not of what it is to kill
deep in the sea is where you should die*

Kawai was astonished at the chivalry demonstrated by RAN authorities who ordered full military honours for the service and cremation of the submariners. On June 7 the Sydney naval chief, Rear Admiral Muirhead-Gould, informed Kawai that the bodies of the four submariners recovered in Sydney would be cremated in two days, ‘if he had no objection.’

Kawai ‘deeply appreciated’ the admiral’s courtesy. He asked that wreaths be sent in his name and that he be allowed to take the ashes back to Japan. Evatt approved the return of the ashes.

Rear Admiral Muirhead-Gould ensured that Australia honored the Japanese as heroes. The bodies of the four submariners were laid in coffins draped with the Rising Sun and incongruously carried on the shoulders of Australian sailors.

Another naval corps followed with guns pointed down and heads lowered in homage. The silence was broken by the salute of three minute-guns and the corpses were cremated to the reverberating peal of the bugles.

As Kawai left Melbourne in August 1942 with his staff and the ashes of the four submariners, he told newsmen, in an interview published around the world but not in Australia, that he had failed in his mission and was returning to Japan ‘a bitterly disappointed man’:

The outbreak of war was the greatest blow I have received in my life. Those Australians who know how I struggled to avert war in the Pacific will understand when I say my spirit has been broken. The gods decreed that Japan and Australia should go to war, and it is a case of kill or be killed, but there is no bitterness in my heart toward Australia.

Captain Philip Proctor, in charge of the guard at Kawai’s *Carn Brea* mansion, on Kawai’s departure wrote to his superiors in the Commonwealth Security Service:

His Excellency Mr Kawai expressed himself as being most disappointed at the turn of events... I am of the opinion that he, personally, is genuine in the expression of this sentiment, but that it is probably on the ground that he is by nature a Pacifist.

Kawai sailed from Melbourne to Lourenco Marques (now Maputo) in east Africa, before taking another ship, the *Kamakura Maru*, to Yokohama. As the old steamer the *City of Canterbury* ploughed through huge seas across the Great Australian Bight, Curtin played mightily on Kawai’s mind, sufficient for him to recall 20 years later: “After being detained for seven months and without even an opportunity to bid him farewell I made my departure from Australia, silently praying for his good health and a brave fight.”

Aboard the *Kamakura Maru* Kawai received the relatives and friends of the dead submariners. “Pray be seated” Kawai said. “Let me recount the scene of their heroic end. Glorious indeed was their end. Look at this photograph. It is of the naval funeral held by the Australian Navy. Even the enemy was moved by the daring of the heroes.” Mothers and fathers listened attentively with deep nods, tears filling their eyes. The parents of one of the submariners, Masao Tsuzuku, asked Kawai: “did our son use all the shots he had?” Kawai indicated that he did, later commenting: “Such words! When (his) parents came to see him before his departure and learned that their son was determined to make the supreme sacrifice, they gave up their plans of finding a bride for their beloved son and spent the last night with him in the small boarding house room. Such father! Such mother!”

Despite national attention on Tatsuo Kawai’s return with the remains of the submariners, the diplomat was very much out of favor. He lunched with Emperor Hirohito at the Imperial Palace on March 18 1943, returned to the *Gaimusho* and resigned that same day, no longer wanted for public service because of his closeness to Australians. “I voluntarily resigned my post and withdrew from diplomatic life” he later wrote. Years later Kawai said he made one public speech in which he tried to persuade Japanese not to hate Australians, because the two countries one day would be neighbours. He made no more speeches, having angered military authorities.

Saving Australia reveals that Australia’s Governor General, Lord Gowrie, a British Victoria Cross winner, thought the Japanese attack could shake Australians out of

their complacency. Gowrie watched the raid from Admiralty House, Kirribilli. He later told King George that he and Lady Zara had a good view: “We couldn’t actually see the submarines, but we could see the small craft buzzing about dropping depth charges and searchlights moving all over the surface of the water.”

In a draft letter to the King, subsequently amended, he wrote: “one had long hoped that something of this kind would occur in order to bring home to the people of Australia the reality of the dangers with which they are faced.”

Two torpedoes fired by one midget submarine at the US cruiser the *Chicago* passed under a Dutch submarine, hit a seawall at Garden Island and exploded, sinking the *Kuttabul*, an old ferry used as a depot ship, killing 21 Australian naval ratings.

In Japan, Kawai retreated to his coastal retreat overlooking at sea at Manazuru, south of Tokyo, and grew *mikan* (tangerines) and vegetables in wartime Japan. Towards the end of the war Kawai joined with Shigeru Yoshida, later foreign minister and prime minister, and other liberals to work secretly towards ending the war. He was on a confidential mission to China when the atomic bombs ended the war.

Kawai was immediately promoted to a number of high media offices and then to vice minister for foreign affairs. But his enigmatic character and his dislike of the Americans quickly led to his dismissal. After that he devoted his life into Australia-Japan trade and friendship as president of the Japan Australia Society.

Prime Minister Robert Menzies secretly visited Kawai at his thatched-roof cottage at Manazuru in 1950 to discuss rekindling trade between Japan and Australia. What Menzies did not know was that Kawai had been harboring at his Manazuru house only a short time before one of the worst wanted war criminals in Japan.

Staff officer Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, who planned the capture of Singapore, was responsible for the slaughter of many thousands of civilians and prisoners-of-war after the fall of the British island. Tsuji came out of hiding when General Douglas MacArthur ended war crimes in Japan in 1950. He was never arrested and went on to become a member of the Japanese Diet, eventually going missing in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Tatsuo Kawai returned to Australia in 1959 to visit Curtin’s widow, Elsie, and dine with her again at Cottesloe. They had been exchanging letters, cards and gifts since the end of the war. On arrival in Australia he said ‘I have been Rip Van Winkle, dreaming of Australia for 17 years’:

John Curtin was one of my best friends. I have not forgotten your country and I have never forgotten John Curtin. This has been my first chance to come back. I am making a special flight from Melbourne to Perth to see Mrs Elsie Curtin who was very good to me. Her husband was a wonderful man.

Toshiro Takeuchi, a young soldier in Manchuria during the war, bought the land for his lodge at Manazuru from Kawai. The two became good friends over the years and would often sit overlooking the bay sipping sake. Takeuchi insists that Kawai had been punished in Japan for being too friendly with Australia.

“That’s my impression. But he never mentioned it and he didn’t complain about his treatment.” The lack of recognition, stemming from the war years, was never rectified in peacetime and an order eventually given to Kawai was much lower than that normally received for ambassadorial service.

Saving Australia reveals that Kawai and his staff gathered military intelligence while in Australia and after the outbreak of war passed the information back to Japan through a collaborator in Australia. Kawai saw no inconsistency in befriending Curtin and negotiating peace with Australia while gathering military intelligence. He saw it as a duty, not treachery. The great irony was that Kawai was the strident Japanese expansionist who became the pacifist under Curtin’s influence while Curtin was the pacifist who became the warrior due to the threat from Japan.

Saving Australia, Curtin’s secret peace with Japan is published by Lothian Books.

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