

Victor William Paget

Research report: Hon Felix Ellis MP for Frank MacDonald Memorial Study Tour 2022

Here lies Victor William Paget. Father, husband. Soldier, son of a sailor. Born an Englishman, married a Tasmanian, died an Australian in the Arnhem islands in Australia's northern approaches. Sapper. Australian 5th Docks Operations Company, Royal Australian Engineers. Born in the First World War, he died during the Second, 26 years old, and was first buried on what the Queen called Crocodile Island, what the Yolngu have known as Milingimbi for thousands of years. Here is his final resting place. This is his story.

Born Verdun Nathaniel William Paget on 24 September 1916 in idyllic Gravesend, Kent, England, to a family who came to prominence due to his high-ranking Royal Navy father, Chief Petty Officer Charles Henry Paget and his wife Helen Beatrice Paget (nee Atherfold). Chief Petty Officer Paget was a veteran of WWI, having signed up at 15 by lying about his age, and would later serve in the same war as his son. Young Victor also had an older sister, Letitia, and younger brother, Valentine. As was common among the officer class of the time, the Pagets moved about the world on various posting, including a documented visit to Turkey by the Paget family.

It is not known how or why Victor would come to Australia but the family speculate he was driven to settle down here having met his future wife Florence Sadie Young. Florence ("Flossy" as she was known) was a Tasmanian competitive ballroom dancer, who travelled regularly to the mainland for dancing competitions. Victor and Florence's descendants note that Victor's parents were disapproving of the relationship, but Victor was headstrong and spurned his life of privilege back in England for his Tasmanian sweetheart. They were married on 28 August 1938 with his name now officially Victor at their home at 69 Goulburn Street, Hobart. Though the world was emerging from the ravages of the Depression it was not a time for lavish celebrating. A new threat had been building. One year later, on 1 September 1939, Nazi Germany led by Adolf Hitler would invade Poland and spark World War II.

In the initial phase of the war, Australian forces were sent overseas, to Europe and North Africa and the British fortress of Singapore. Australia's role as a British colony was in the defence of Empire. Though Imperial Japan had been involved in a brutal war against Nationalist China since 1937, Australia still maintained close trading ties with Japan. Indeed, in his first iteration as United Australia Party Prime Minister, Robert Menzies earned the derogatory nickname "pig iron Bob" for continuing to approve the sale of this vital industrial material to the Japanese smelters which were at the centre of the Japanese war machine. It wasn't until 7 December 1941 when Japanese bombers tore through the US Hawaiian Naval base Pearl Harbour, destroying four battleships and damaging a range of other vessels, destroying more than 180 aircraft and killing in excess of 2,400 Americans. American President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared it "a day that will live in infamy", and Prime Minister John Curtin announced that as a result Australia was now also at war with Japan.

Despite conflict now engulfing nearly every continent, and his father in the thick of another World War, Victor remained at home. He had been of fighting age ever since the war began. However, he was engaged as a toolmaker, a vital skilled industrial trade which would have been critical for Australia's wartime production (though no technical or other educational qualification is listed in his papers). Such a trade would have put him on the *List of reserved occupations (provisional)* which was

designed to prevent conscription of and discourage volunteering by certain occupations deemed vital to the war production effort in Australia.

By 1942 things were going badly on the home front. Australia was beset by industrial strikes which threatened its military supply chains, particularly in the NSW coal mines and on the waterfront, at precisely the time Australia needed to be in peak preparedness to face the coming enemy. Lawlessness among the waterside workers had long been a feature of ports in Australia but the theft of military equipment now resulted in catastrophic outcomes in combat, as well as a failure to supply vital provisions and armaments. Labour strikes were rife loading military vessels, including even the hospital ship *HMAS Manunda* (later sunk in the bombing of Darwin), which was described at the time as “one of the most wicked strikes ever seen in this country”. Dockers were demanding triple of even quadruple pay to load munitions for the war effort, asking more danger money than those at the front. Labour was short and the US military had begun loading its own ships in many cases.

From this Labor Prime Minister John Curtin, once an avowed socialist, established the Docks Operating Companies under the Royal Australian Engineers to break the stranglehold of the Waterside Workers Union and boost Australia’s flagging shipping capability. It was opposed by many of his colleagues on his own side. It was into this fledgeling support unit that Victor Paget was assigned after enlisting on 14 September 1942. Perhaps the worsening situation of the war in Australia’s north compelled him to sign up. The Japanese attacks on Darwin and Broome in 1942 claimed more than 230 and 80 lives respectively, though with censorship it is unclear how much of this situation was known to him. It is also possible that his enlistment in Sydney points to a desire to assist with the logistics of the war, NSW contributing to over 80 per cent of 6 million workdays lost due to strikes. Whatever the case, the initial resistance from the Government to skilled trades signing up was gone now, given the desperate situation in the war and on the wharves.

Victor Paget was now a member of the Australian Army and given the Engineers rank of Sapper, equivalent to a Private in the infantry. His service number was NX98147. He was assigned the role of Stevedore, graded Class III. His rude good health (medical fitness Class A1) made him an excellent choice for the physical demands of the role, at that time often loading and unloading ships by hand. Prime Minister Curtin said he would take all requisite steps to “keep ships moving”. Sapper Paget would oblige.

The bombing of Darwin was the brutal start to what became a protracted air campaign in Northern Australia. The Japanese made 77 raids on Northern Australia, while the Australian and Allied forces (including the US, UK, Canada and the Netherlands) conducted counter raids on Japanese air bases in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), Timor and New Guinea. It was part of a holding pattern on the flank of US General MacArthur’s main strategy of a counterattack to retake Rabaul and eventually the Philippines and on to Japan. As part of this Northern Australia strategy the Allies established a number of bases in the Northern Territory, Cape York and the North West of Western Australia. Among this number, was a remote RAAF base established on the island of Milingimbi, East Arnhem Land.

The island was a Methodist Aboriginal Mission and had no road access from Darwin or any other major centre (which is still the case today). It is a flat steamy tropical island, separated from the Arnhem mainland by a narrow strait and was home to subsistence farming, crocodiles and endless mosquitoes. Initially a contract was awarded to construct a landing strip on Milingimbi in February 1940. The No 59 Operational Base Unit was established on the island, eventually housing 350 mostly RAAF personal and some 600 local indigenous people. Future Prime Minister Gough Whitlam is

believed to have operated out of the area during his time as a World War II Air Force navigator. Odgers' official history of the war records that the Japanese had observed that Milingimbi was increasingly used as a staging airfield for Beaufighter and Spitfire aircraft in their raids on the other side of the Arafura Sea. A number of effective raids, particularly on flying boat bases had originated from Milingimbi.

Back in NSW, Sapper Paget initially had a slow start to his military career. He was discovered Absent Without Leave on Boxing Day 1942, an indiscretion for which he was fined. It is not known for certain, but this date coincides with a time when Florence would have been early in her pregnancy with twins, joyous news for a young father and his family. He also spent time in and out of hospital in January 1943, including for urethritis. On 5 February, less than a week after he was out of hospital, Sapper Paget was deployed to the Northern Territory Force. He arrived on 16 February 1943 transiting from Sydney, nearly a year to the day of the initial Bombing of Darwin.

We can only imagine the cultural shock of this young man who grew up in a Navy officer's household in England and fell in love in the very English state of Tasmania. What would he have thought as he sailed into Darwin Harbour, with its mangroves, savannahs, and tropical rainforests. Feeling the heat and humidity, seeing the crocodiles. The presence of the Larrakia mob and indigenous culture, as well as the distinct Chinese influence in the top end. Sapper Paget may have known what he would be facing when he kissed goodbye his darling wife Florence, by now likely beginning to show signs of pregnancy, cradling in her arms baby Dale Raymond Paget born 2 May the year before. But it is hard to picture a place more different from his adopted homeland while still in Australia. He got to work quickly as a stevedore, with the operational tempo high and willing waterside workers in short supply across the remote bases of the far north.

Sapper Paget's unit was in Milingimbi on 9 May 1943. Being a Sunday many on the island had attended church, though Paget, himself a Church of England Anglican, was unloading aircraft fuel, munitions and other supplies from the *SS Islander* and *HMAS Maroubra* with others from 5 Docks Operating Company. They were guarded by the Navy corvette, *HMAS Latrobe*.

At around 11:00am radar detected potential hostile aircraft approaching and ten minutes later Japanese aircraft were sighted. Initially the bombers targeted the island's stores at the Mission, including goods recently unloaded from the *Islander*. Many of the island's local women and children had been moved to the other side of the island for safety, though many Yolgnu men stayed. Air raid sirens went up but some men remained in place, including four playing cards at a table out in the open. With the Japanese "Sally" bombers dropping anti-personnel "daisy-cutter" bombs, one of these men, Galmata, was killed and three others wounded. Much of the cargo being unloaded was destroyed, as well as the church and medical dispensary. Those on the ground expected the Japanese bombers would circle back around for another strike on their targets. Many now hid in the shelter of the mangroves and slit trenches.

Onboard the *Islander*, Sapper Paget and others in his company were scrambling to throw over the side drums of fuel that had been moved on to the deck as part of the unloading. Captain Bert Cummings said "I have never seen a deck cargo move so quickly. They fairly dealt those high-octane drums over the side like a deck of cards." In seeking to move the drums to safety, Sapper Paget was in a highly exposed position when the Japanese bombers re-entered the fray. The ship was now mobile and had begun taking evasive action as the bombers struck precisely in the position the *Islander* had just been. The damage to the islander was indirect but substantial, with an estimated 300 puncture holes the vessel from the explosion. As the Sally bombers departed, Captain Cumming called for air support from Spitfires at neighbouring bases who confirmed pursuit. He then assessed

the damage – all up 12 of the crew were injured, including the First Mate Johnny Mcraw. However, the worst of all these was young Sapper Paget, his stomach slashed open by a large piece of shrapnel.

Stomach wounds often led to a particularly dreadful death and Sapper Paget's final minutes are likely to have been agonising. There was little that could be done for a wound that extensive in such a remote location. In his final moments, in between the pain, Sapper Paget may have thought about his wife Florence, his baby son Dale who that week had celebrated his first birthday, and the little twins he was so close to meeting for the first time. He may have pictured the neat brick cottage on Goulburn Street with the sandstone steps where they had lived together, or the idyllic countryside in Kent on the River Thames where he had grown up. He almost certainly would not have imagined this would be the way he would go. He was spared a long death and was gone in minutes. Sapper Paget was listed as "Killed in Action" on 9 May 1943 and was buried at Milingimbi Mission Cemetery.

The raids continued and Milingimbi was bombed again the next day, with the Japanese sinking HMAS *Maroubra*. The official history records the death of ten airmen as part of the raid, though later sources dispute this and it is believed these men had been killed in an incident at Rambuma Island on 28 April and their bodies recovered to Milingimbi at the time of the bombing. The hero of the bombing was Flight Lieutenant Jack Slade who touched down in Milingimbi on his mail and supply run just as the bombing begun. His plane was damaged but immediately after the attack, with the help of an aircraft fitter, he was able to fly two wounded men to the base at Coomalie Creek for urgent attention. For his bravery he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Word of Sapper Paget's death reached his father, now a senior commissioned officer with the Royal Air Force. Using his influence, Squadron Leader Paget urgently cabled Australia, seeking information about the possible passing of his son. A man surrounded by death, his fears for his eldest son half a world away took his focus. A reply was received on 27 August confirming the tragic news: "enclosing Certificate of Death No. 4605 of abovementioned deceased".

In his will, Sapper Paget named his wife Florence as the sole beneficiary of his estate, her residence at the time listed at 181 Collins Street, Hobart. The letter was to find her still in Victoria with son Dale. She was 8 months pregnant with twins and unable to return to Tasmania until they were born. It is hard to fathom the shock, her handsome English beau, father of her children. Gone so quickly, so unexpectedly, in a place so far away. She gave birth to Maureen and Margaret on 4 July 1943.

Sapper Paget's memory survives through his descendants and I want to acknowledge their assistance in preparing this profile. Florence died in 1974 in Hobart. For his service to this country, his country, he was awarded the 1939/45 Star, Defence Medal, War Medal and Australia Service Medal. He is recognised on the Wall of Remembrance at the Darwin Military Museum and the Australian War Memorial. His body was moved with the other honoured dead buried in scattered pockets of the Territory to the Adelaide River War Cemetery, where he rests to this day. The inscription on his grave plaque reads "Free from this world of sorrow the Lord hath safely taken him". Rest in Peace Sapper Victor William Paget.

Lest We Forget.