



“Triumphant return



Above: Midget submarine commanders Lieutenant Chuman Kenshi (rear), Lieutenant Matsuo Keiu (right) and Lieutenant Akieda Saburo (left) in Japan in 1942. During the simultaneous midget submarine attacks in Sydney and Diego Suarez in Madagascar on 31 May 1942, all three officers died. AWM 128891

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The Japanese midget submarine attack in Sydney turned the crew into heroes on the silver screen. **By Keiko Tamura**

The scene is one of quiet simplicity. The occasion of the cremation of four brave men who died for their country – the country whose policies are viewed with abhorrence by us, but whose brave men in death are honoured as all brave men are honoured throughout the world. There are no mourners present, but there were many who came to pay their respects.

That was the solemn voice of Fred Simpson on ABC radio describing the ceremony. After the midget submarine attack in Sydney Harbour on the night of 31 May 1942, two vessels and four submariners’ bodies were recovered. They were placed in caskets draped with the Japanese flag and cremated after the funeral service. The funeral took place at the Eastern Suburbs Cemetery on 9 June 1942, and the ABC broadcast was transmitted to Japan on shortwave radio.

Rear Admiral G. C. Muirhead-Gould, Flag Officer-in-Charge of Sydney Harbour, was responsible for arranging the military funeral for the Japanese crew. His decision caused a controversy and he had to defend having offered such high honours to these enemy combatants. He said on the radio:

I have been criticised for having accorded these men military honours at their cremation, such honours as we hope may be accorded to our own comrades who have died in enemy hands, but I ask you – Should we not accord full honours to such brave men as these? It must take courage of the very highest order to go out in a thing like this steel coffin.

In spite of some opposition, the Australian people generally accepted that it was correct to treat with dignity the enemy who had fought bravely and died for their country. The *Sydney Morning Herald* defended the rear admiral in an editorial, saying that Australians “will desire that the enemy’s dead, like their own, shall not be treated with ignominy”. Lieutenant John Acheson Burstal, who was given the difficult task of finding four large Japanese flags in wartime Sydney to cover the caskets, also wrote that “all Naval personnel thought that he had done the right thing”.

The ashes of the Japanese submariners were handed to Minister Kawai Tatsuo in Melbourne; surprisingly, they were to be repatriated to Japan. Kawai had been the Japanese diplomatic representative in Australia since March 1941, and had been



in silence”



interned at the outbreak of hostilities. He and more than 800 Japanese civilian internees were to be exchanged for civilians of Allied nations similarly caught by the war and interned in Japan. The Japanese internees boarded the *City of Canterbury* on 18 August 1942, bound for the port of Lourenço Marques in the colony of Portuguese East Africa (now Maputo in Mozambique). There they met the Japanese ship *Kamakura Maru* and the exchange of passengers took place.

During the voyage home, the Japanese submariners' ashes were treated as living heroes. Until his arrival in Lourenço Marques, Kawai had installed the ashes in a simple altar in his first-class cabin. Once the ashes were transferred to the Japanese ship, one of the first-class lounges was designated as a holy shrine and the ashes were placed there.

Kamakura Maru reached Yokohama on 9 October 1942. In the attack on Pearl Harbor nine midget submariners had been lost, and they had since been revered in Japan as military gods. The arrival of the Sydney submariners' ashes became front-page news throughout Japan.

Earlier, the Imperial Japanese Navy had

made an official announcement of the Sydney attack, but the report was sketchy. It had said that the submarines infiltrated the harbour and caused chaos and confusion, and it was assumed that one warship had been sunk by torpedo. (In fact, 21 sailors had died when the ferry *Kuttabul* was sunk.) By the time the ashes reached Japan, a comprehensive and accurate Australian report had been received there, but the authorities assumed that Australia was playing down the extent of the damage.

The media were in full swing to report minute-by-minute accounts of the arrival of the ashes. Large photographs of the four crew, Matsuo Keiu, Chuman Kenshi, Tsuzuku Masao and Omori Takeshi, were splashed across the front page, accompanied by detailed descriptions of their backgrounds. The headlines were filled with the highest praise for those who had sacrificed their young lives for their country.

Prominent writers were dispatched to Yokohama Wharf to cover the arrival. One of them was Yoshikawa Eiji, author of the bestselling novel *Musashi*, the story of a legendary master swordsman who lived in the 1600s. Yoshikawa described the scene in

Above, scenes from the film, left to right:

A miniature set of Sydney Harbour was carefully built in the Daiei film studio to re-create the attack scene. In the film, an Allied warship is hit by a torpedo from Matsuo's submarine next to the Harbour Bridge and sinks. The still photographs taken from the film were reproduced from the commemorative album compiled by Daiei Film Company in 1944 and presented to the Matsuo family. The author wishes to thank the family for their help and cooperation.



Above: A scene from the film where Matsuo's father examines a sword before presenting it to his son, while his mother looks on.

highly charged emotional language for the newspaper *Yomiuri*. His essay was broadcast on shortwave radio and monitored by the Allies, but by the time an account of it reached Australia, his name had been transcribed as “A. G. Oshgaha”.

The Allies’ interpretation was that Yoshikawa had expressed Japanese appreciation to Australia for the respectful treatment of the crews’ bodies – but this interpretation had missed his sarcastic tone. Yoshikawa certainly did thank Muirhead-Gould, but he issued a challenge to Australia: could such courageous men as the four submariners be found outside Japan?

If you could have accompanied the four hero spirits and reached Yokohama on the Kamakura Maru, you would have seen what happened at Yokohama Wharf this morning. Then you would witness what kind of land and what kind of parents could bear four such heroic warriors.

Yoshikawa’s praise of the parents foretold what would happen in the following months. The fame of the crew grew greater and greater as they continued to be awarded the highest honours of the Imperial Navy. In December 1942, Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku awarded them a citation for bravery. Then in March 1943 all the crew were granted a special promotion of two ranks. Finally the navy funeral was held in the Kure Naval Headquarters in April 1943. Numerous articles were written and coverage started to extend to their family backgrounds. In this process, Matsuo Keiu was chosen as the perfect hero to be revered.

Matsuo was born the second son in a family of educators in the small country town of Yamaga in western Japan. Both his parents,

as well as his elder brother, were respected schoolteachers in the community. Matsuo was regarded as a rascal in his youth, but he grew up to be a tall and handsome young man by the time he graduated from the acclaimed Imperial Naval Academy in Etajima.

He was engaged to Kinoshita Toshiko, the beautiful daughter of a navy captain; but in his will, he instructed his parents to release her from the engagement and set her free. Toshiko attended the navy funeral, dressed in a black mourning kimono; the papers described her as “the unwedded bride of a hero”. Her grief at losing her fiancé was treated as a tragic but beautiful story to heighten Matsuo’s status as a hero.

Matsuo’s sword, which he took with him on the mission, became a legend. In a published essay, his elder brother wrote that Matsuo had been presented with a Kikuchi sword by his father before the mission. This was no ordinary sword. It had been forged around the time when the local samurai family, the Kikuchi Clan, were fighting to defend the emperor against the rebel warrior, Ashikaga Takauji. The people of Yamaga were deeply proud of the contribution of the Kikuchi Clan to the emperor 600 years earlier, and the sword symbolised their past dedication and contemporary loyalty to the nation. Matsuo bid farewell to his beautiful fiancée, but he carried the legendary sword with him to the attack on Sydney Harbour.

The hero-making reached its climax with the film *One Thousand Spears of the Kikuchi Clan: Special Mission to Sydney*, released in January 1944 by the Daiei Film Company. A well-known novelist and publisher, Kikuchi Kan, wrote the original script and

Below: Matsuo received posthumous two-rank promotion (to commander) with the rest of the midget submarine crews. AWM 128888



led the production. Kikuchi, though he was not related to the local Kikuchis, had been following the story of the midget submarine crews since the arrival of the ashes. His three-part story traces the mythic power of the Kikuchi swords: first in tales from the 13th century and the 19th, and rounded off with the contemporary story of Matsuo taking his sword on the successful midget submarine attack, during which he sinks a warship and meets a courageous death.

The story of Matsuo and his family was told faithfully, although the names of the characters were changed slightly. A young and upcoming actor, Kobayashi Keiju, played the central role, and a beautiful actress played his fiancée. The film production team visited his family home in Yamaga for a location shoot and to recreate the scene of his father presenting the Kikuchi sword to Matsuo. This film was an effective vehicle to raise the spirits of the Japanese. It told the story of courageous heroes who did not fear death, with a dash of romance thrown in, while the actual war situation had already turned grim and desperate for Japan.

A set of the midget submarine's conning tower was built in order to shoot realistic interiors, as well as scenes above the hatch. Most extraordinarily, a miniature set of Sydney Harbour, complete with the Harbour



Left: Two members of the RAN examine a sword and pistol recovered from Chuman's submarine. These items are now displayed at the Australian War Memorial. Matsuo's sword, however, has vanished. AWM P00455.018

Bridge, was meticulously built in the studio to re-create the attack scene. In the film, the torpedo from Matsuo's submarine hits an Allied warship near the Harbour Bridge, sinking it.

Today the film has vanished. An extensive search by Yamaga film enthusiasts has so far been unsuccessful. A commemorative photo album of the film's production, presented to Matsuo's family, is the only source of information. Yet we know that the legend of the submariners was created and screened throughout Japan. The heroes who made a triumphant return in silence to Japan were reborn on the screen. 🏰

Below: A scene from the film in which Matsuo (left) gives instruction to his crew before the attack.

