
The End of a Legend

A living legend ended recently with the death in the Northern Territory of Joe Attawomba. A student of the old school, Joe was the best-known Aboriginal tracker in the Territory. His death followed 5 years of illness due to tuberculosis.

Little is known about Joe's early life. He was a stockman on Dorisvale station when only a lad. Just before the war he was tried for a tribal killing and committed to a life sentence.

In February, 1942, when the Japanese bombing of Darwin began, Mr Justice Wells released all prisoners. Joe was sent as a tracker to Daly River Police Station under Constable Tasman Fitzter, the famous bush policeman.

In those days there were only horse patrols to cover hundreds of miles. Joe became famous for his work in searching for downed pilots. According to Constable Fitzter, Joe was an utterly reliable tracker and a valued camp sergeant.

A street was named after Attawomba in the Bagot subdivision near Fitzter Drive, which commemorates the work of his former boss.

In 1946, during one of the worst floods in the history of the Territory, Fitzter's wife fell desperately ill. Joe was responsible for saving her life.

The pedal wireless had broken down and Attawomba set off in search of a doctor. In the following 48 hours he swam across half a dozen swollen creeks and ran 90 miles to get assistance at Adelaide River. He was in his 40s at that time.

Mrs Fitzter later described Joe as "a real nomad, but completely trustworthy . . . a lovely man. He had a fine physique and a fine character".

After the Fitzters left the Daly, Joe went to stay with Mrs Fitzter's sister, Myrtle Fawcett, at Adelaide River. While there he discovered he had contracted tuberculosis.

He retired on an invalid pension and was in and out of hospital during his last few years. Mrs Fawcett cared for him, getting his ration and his many comforts.

Married several times, Joe spent his last years with his tribal wife, Ruby, who still lives at Adelaide River.

Commenting after his death, Mrs Fitzter said: "He had a stepdaughter at the Daly River Mission who wanted him to go back there so she could look after him. But Attawomba loved his freedom too much to leave the bush".

What follows is Father Frank Flynn's account of the rescue mission which set out to reach Mrs Fitzter after Joe had brought the news of her illness. This account was forwarded to *New Dawn* by Mrs Fawcett:

"I shall always remember a dramatic rescue voyage that I once made to Daly River in a boom-defence vessel, H.M.A.S. *Kangaroo*. It was in the middle of the wet season of 1946, a year of record rains, when the swollen river rose to a height of over 40 feet, broke its banks and flooded for miles over the surrounding plains.

On 14th February, Constable Tasman Fitzter, in charge of the Daly River Police Station at the time, wrote a letter to the Superintendent of Police in Darwin, marked it "Most Urgent" and sent it with a black tracker named Joe Attawomba to Adelaide River. This was his only chance of getting a message through because his radio transceiver was out of order, the airstrip under water and the road to the Stuart Highway was impassable for any type of vehicle.

On the night of 16th February, Joe walked into Adelaide River Police Station, having covered 90 miles of water and bog on foot in 2 days, and handed the letter marked "Most Urgent" to Constable Ron Hughes. The message stated that Constable Fitzter's wife needed medical help urgently, as she had endured severe abdominal pain for several days without relief and had become critically ill. Constable Hughes telephoned the message through to the Superintendent in Darwin. The naval officer-in-charge there agreed to make H.M.A.S. *Kangaroo* available to take the relief party that was already being assembled to Anson Bay, which forms the mouth of the Daly River. As it was out of the question for a vessel of this size to navigate the river itself a crash launch with two powerful