

Grand Old Lady of Santa Ysabel

How Emily Sprott, of Britain's Melanesian Mission defied Japanese Invaders

(By Roy Burnham).

Shot down over Santa Ysabel during the fierce battles for the Solomon Islands, an American airman lay wounded in the jungle, expecting to be captured by the Japanese at any moment.

There was a movement in the bushes and two brown, fuzzy-haired natives appeared. They assured him that they were friends, picked him up, and carried him along jungle paths to a native village of bamboo and sago leaf huts where a native medical practitioner operated on his wounds with modern equipment.

Then into the hut there walked an Englishwoman carrying a cup of tea.

She seemed a little tired, the airman related later, when on leave in Auckland, and bush life had played havoc with her eyes. And small wonder, for this grand old lady, Mrs Emily Sprott, is a member of the British Melanesian Mission and the only white person on Santa Ysabel.

Women Anxious to Remain.

For many months she had lived alone among the natives. All round

her, Japanese were shooting, pillaging and looting. Her chest of tea was the only provision left and for a long time she lived on native dishes, yams and kumeras. When the Japanese landed at Thousand-Ships' Bay she had left her mission station at Meringe, taking all her medical equipment and setting up dispensaries in the bush. The natives hid her from the Japanese, giving her their best. They warned her of the enemy's movements. They acted as look-outs, picking up shot-down airmen, helping her to nurse them back to health, then leading them back to the Allied lines by canoe.

In all, Mrs. Sprott rescued 12 Americans and buried four others.

She was not the only missionary who remained behind throughout the occupation. There were sixteen members of the Melanesian Mission, many women, scattered throughout the Solomons.

Bishop Baddeley, M.A., D.S.O., M.C., was head of the mission. Although when the invasion seemed imminent, the Resident Commission-

er had discussed the subject of the women folk, the Bishop knew that they were anxious to remain. He believed that the natives would be loyal and that the bush would offer adequate protection; and he had a firm belief that the tide would turn. He was at his headquarters on Tulagi when the Japanese landed on Santa Ysabel and then bombed Tulagi, which the army did not intend to hold.

That night, by the light of burning oil dumps and stores, he set sail in rough seas for Mala, half afraid that he might run into an enemy convoy. Meeting other members of the staff he mapped out a plan of campaign. There was work to be done. The natives had no knowledge of modern warfare, warships, gunfire or bombing. It would have been easy for them to become panic-stricken and terrified. Yet they regarded the British Administration as just and the missionaries as friends who could be relied on.

Missionaries Did Not Fail.

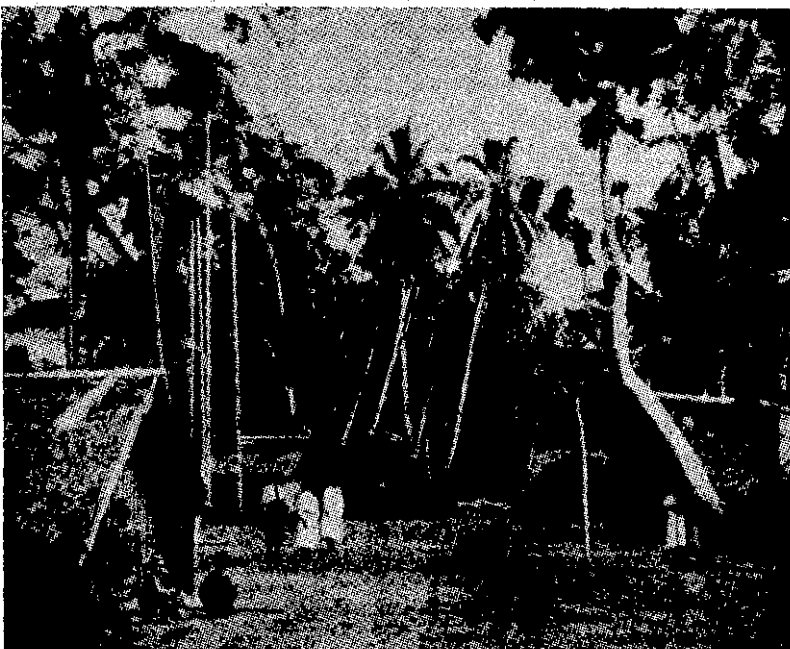
The missionaries did not fail them. In those early days they were constantly travelling, always by night, often by canoe, making many dangerous journeys to reassure and advise people, and by their own example to crush the fear for the Japanese bombers which were constantly overhead. As the Japanese swarmed over the islands they were met by a spirit they could not understand and did not expect. They knew that, somehow, the missionaries were responsible. The natives were staunch and loyal. They could not fire guns, but they fought the Japanese just the same by their stubborn attitude and hostile manner, refusing to co-operate in any way.

When the enemy ran short of medical supplies they began to rob the natives of calico, but the islanders locked their stores in tin boxes and were shot before they would surrender the key.

From their bush hide-outs the Bishop and his staff carried on. On Mala, the mission hospital had been evacuated to an island village with a pleasant river. From there Dr. Thomson and the three nursing sisters continued their work of healing the sick, tending the victims of Japanese atrocities and running a maternity ward.

Schools Still Functioned.

Sister Stead writes: "The hospital filled rapidly and there was a record number of patients. Trained medical orderlies were posted at various points and entrusted with hospital supplies, and we were also able to carry on work from these 'dispensaries.' The medical officer toured the districts, helped and guided his



A MELANESIAN VILLAGE