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This American Soldier–Serial Killer Terrorized Wartime Australia

By Erin Cook and Ned Colin

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Pvt. Eddie Leonski kept hearing women’s voices in his head. Then the bodies started piling up.

It wasn’t a good time, but there were some great times. The women of Melbourne, Australia, had their own duties to fulfill on the homefront during World War II: factory work, raising children, welcoming American GIs flooding into the city. Late-night dances in Melbourne’s “brownout” — not quite a blackout but certainly dark enough to obscure the city from any Japanese pilots lurking above — were lighthearted fun, a break from the stresses of war. Until women’s bodies began turning up.

The corpse of Ivy McLeod, 40, was discovered in the early hours of May 3, 1942; she had been strangled in an inner-city neighborhood. Pauline Thompson, 31, turned up less than a week later, strangled and dumped in her own doorway at the edge of the city. Gladys Hosking, 40, was found on May 18 in a park near Camp Pell, a massive camp housing thousands of GIs awaiting word on when they’d be shipped out to the Pacific theater. Two of the three women had last been seen alive in the company of a man with an American accent. The hunt was on.

The Yanks had been welcomed to the city, says Bart Ziino, a historian at Victoria's Deakin University. As the war tore across Europe, troops in Southeast Asia were thinned to protect the homefront. Imperial Japan snapped up the region, taking advantage of local populations weakened by colonialism. With Australian and New Zealand forces supporting the British in the Middle East, invasion looked near certain.

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Bart Ziino, historian at Deakin University

It didn't help that Winston Churchill had abandoned Australia, refusing to send troops to protect the country. In response, Prime Minister John Curtin reached out to U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who sent thousands of servicemen from 1942 onward. By 1943, 250,000 American GIs were roaming the streets of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. Australia and its population of 7 million finally felt safe.

In the end, Japan never did invade. The real wartime terror for Melbourne came in the form of an American GI.

New Jersey-born Eddie Leonski was conscripted into the Army in 1941, prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Keen to leave behind a family life marred by abuse and mental health issues, the private developed alcoholism during training in Texas, according to military documents. Around that time he also reportedly attempted to strangle a woman. If his superiors in the Army were aware of these allegations, it did not prevent them from shipping the 24-year-old off to Australia in January 1942.

For Australian women, it was a heady time of incremental but definite social change. Women had always been in the industrial workforce, especially working-class women, according to Ziino. But women moving into paid work in much greater numbers took off around this time. "The Japanese threat saw the economy really ramp up," he says, noting how women were required to move into armaments production and other industrial sectors.

They also had a special role when it came to U.S. forces — show them a good time. This didn't necessarily mean sex, but it did mean engaging socially in pubs, bars and dance halls. It was a tough world for the women to navigate — the freedoms afforded by the war existed within a conservative culture. Be friendly, but not too friendly. "Women weren't throwing themselves at the men," says Ziino. "But commentary at the time criticized them for being too forward."

Americans were seen as morally looser. So when the trio of [dead women](#) indicated a crime with sexual elements — all three victims had pieces of clothing removed or were partially disrobed — the police headed to Camp Pell. "There was a sense it had to be an American serviceman, if only for the comfort that it couldn't be one of us," Ziino explains.

The hunch proved correct. Local police zeroed in on Leonski as the man dubbed “the Brownout Strangler” by local media. It turned out the killings weren’t about robbery or sexual assault. They were about the women’s voices, Leonski told investigators. Thompson had been singing, he said, and he wanted to capture the voice. “She was singing in my ear, it sounded as if she was singing for me,” he said. “I grabbed her. She stopped singing.”

“The public revulsion was very over the top,” says Ian W. Shaw, author of a new book about the killings, *Murder at Dusk*. “The reporting at the time was very different. He murdered them in a hard, vicious way, but it was described with euphemisms like ‘criminal assault.’”

Leonski was court-martialed for his crimes rather than charged through the state justice system. The five-day trial was closed to the public, and local authorities imposed tight controls on press coverage. The U.S. Army sentenced Leonski to hang for the murders after a court [psychologist](#) said he was likely to continue reoffending. (Shaw uncovered psychiatric reports that showed Leonski had evaded identification as a possible violent offender earlier in his Army career.)

Leonski joined a long list of the state’s most notorious criminals housed in what was then the outer suburb of Coburg, at Pentridge Prison, previously home to bushranger Ned Kelly and 1920s gangster Squizzy Taylor. For 22 weeks he waited on an appeal. Then a letter from Roosevelt arrived. Leonski was hanged on Nov. 9, 1942. To this day, he’s the only person tried and [executed](#) on Australian soil by a foreign government.