

# **CALOUNDRA IN WW2**

## **TITLE**

Can I say from the outset that I'm too young to remember anything about Caloundra in the dark days of World War 2.

Hard to believe, I know.

Consequently, I've had to depend on a number of others who either had first-hand recollections, spoke with people who did, or put time and effort into researching the subject.

I refer to people like --

- A colleague from Brisbane Telegraph days, Supreme Court Reporter and historian Hec Holthouse,
- Army and newspaper colleague Peter Charlton,
- Journalist, broadcaster and author Ron Donald,
- And last but certainly not least, that super-prolific local history trio John and Janice Groves and Anne Wensley.

As you heard earlier, John, Janice and Anne are with us today, so at the end of my presentation I'll happily bow to greater knowledge and hand over to them to take any questions you might have.

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## **CALOUNDRA 1939 AERIAL** Pic SC

Caloundra in the 1930's was a quiet seaside village, part of the Landsborough Shire.

It had a population of just 271 in 1933 – but it'd been a popular holiday spot for many years. The summer months brought a substantial increase in the population with visitors keen to enjoy the great beaches and fishing.

In fact, such was its popularity that the Metropolitan Life Saving Club began patrols on Kings and Dicky Beaches in 1920, transferring its headquarters from Bribie Island's Ocean Beach to Kings Beach in 1933.

Hotels and guest houses provided accommodation for the visitors and the Governor of Queensland, Sir Leslie Wilson, had his holiday home on the bluff overlooking Dicky Beach.

There were other visitors too. For a number of years, the Militia – part-time citizen soldiers – camped and trained north of the village, at Battery Hill.

**ARTILLERY** AWM

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As far away as Europe was, the war's tentacles reached right to our front door. With German raiders loose in the Pacific and the main shipping channel into Moreton Bay running right past our doorstep, **NW CHANNEL VIEW** Pic SC Caloundra was the key that opened – or closed – the door to the major port of Brisbane.

As part of the defence of Moreton Bay, a gun battery was built on Moreton Island in the late 1930s and on Bribie Island in 1939. Fort Bribie consisted of two 6 in guns from the WW1 light cruiser HMAS Sydney, scrapped in 1925..

The 35-ton guns were dismantled into five pieces – barrel, breech, pedestal and shield -- at Fort Lytton at the mouth of the Brisbane River and brought by rail and road to Caloundra in parts.

### **GUN ON BARGE** Pic SC

The 9-ton barrel was carried, slowly and carefully, on a 6-ton capacity truck, from Landsborough to Caloundra, transferred to a barge at what is now the Coastguard jetty and floated across the Pumistone passage. (Note the barrel poking through into the wheelhouse here.) Military Jetty at Golden Beach wasn't built until later in the war, with Army Water Transport soldiers based on either side of the ferry.

There was no road from the landing site so the heavy loads had to be carefully driven through the scrub and sand to the sites.

Once there, the components had to be unloaded manually – no mean feat given their size and weight. A simple bush solution was found to unload the unwieldy shield. Holes were dug by the truck wheels and the truck driven backward and forward into the holes until the shield fell off.

With just block and tackle, hand spikes and rollers, the component parts were assembled on a cruciform base behind the dune and part of the dune shovelled away to provide an arc for firing.

### **GUN ON BEACH** Groves?

The test firing didn't go well. Its base tilted downwards so it couldn't be fired again. This photograph was taken many years later after the shoreline had receded.

Coincidentally, I was involved with another 6in Navy gun barrel during a posting to Perth when the Fort Bickley gun on Rottnest Island was dug out of the sand, and refurbished by Army tradesmen. Legend had it that it also was from HMAS Sydney but in fact it was from a sister ship, HMAS Brisbane.

As early as March 1940, shortly after the Bribie guns were installed, Queensland's senior military officer recommended a change of focus from enemy raiders to invasion and that the temporary Fort Bribie be developed as the principal defence of Moreton Bay. He also recommended that a battalion of troops be allocated for the defence of the Fort itself – that's 700 men.

## **GUN EMPLACEMENT** Groves

Two large concrete emplacements were built, with searchlight, mortar and machinegun positions, accommodation for the nearly 200 crews and support staff, including, later in the war, AWAS (Australian Women's Army Service). A minefield to protect the fort from seaward attack was laid just offshore and sailors manned a control room from which the mines would be activated.

Because of its Caloundra connection, I've concentrated on the Fort Bribie guns but in 1942 a second Bribie Island gun battery – Skirmish Battery – was built at Woorum to protect the Pearl Channel between Bribie and Moreton Islands. The Battery consisted of two 155mm American Field Guns.

The Navy also built its Station No 4 controlling a 25 kilometre indicator loop across the Bay and harbour defence ASDIC systems to detect submarines.

Richard Walding gives a good explanation of how the indicator loop worked and the Navy's presence on Bribie Island in his contribution to the Brisbane History Group's publication "Brisbane and World War 2".

In all, some 2000 Servicemen and women served on Bribie Island, including garrison troops manning 11 machine-gun positions and patrolling in Bren gun carriers.

Mosquitoes and sandflies made it an uncomfortable posting and its isolation made for some creative forays from the northern battery to the "big smoke" of Caloundra with its dances, picture theatre and local hospitality.

Often soldiers would go AWOL by swimming across Pumistone Passage from the northern tip of the island to Bulcock beach, floating their clothes in kerosene tins and walking into town. One soldier found an abandoned boat and did very well charging his mates 2/- to ferry them to the mainland.

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### **TENTED PWSS** AWM

A temporary Port War Signal Station was set up under canvas in front of the Caloundra lighthouse while a more permanent three-storey structure was being built on the Wickham Point headland in front of what is now the Pacific View Resort.

### **THREE STOREY PWSS** Groves

A Port War Signal Station acts as a checkpoint for shipping and a fire control post for a harbour's defences. Ships who gave the correct response to flag, light or radio challenges would be sent to a separate anchorage to be inspected by the Examining vessel before proceeding to its berth. Those that failed to give

the correct response ran the risk of the PWSS calling down gunfire from the forts covering the entrance or activating mines guarding the bay entrance.

## **SIGNAL STATION VIEW**

It was an essential lookout post that controlled all the shipping in and out of the Bay.

The Navy built a house for the staff where the resort is today. Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) who were signallers at the station, lived in cottages in nearby Memorial Lane.

## **FIRE COMMAND HQ** Pic SC

In conjunction with the Port War Signal Station, Army set up a Fire Command Headquarters in a requisitioned house on the corner of Burgess and Albert Streets. It incorporated a lookout built on top of the house and was operated with AWAS signallers.

Its job was to coordinate the Bribie Island batteries and other gun positions later set up on the mainland.

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In 1942, with the Japanese occupying Hong Kong, Singapore and most of the Indonesian Archipelago, the fear of Australia being invaded was high. Australian troops were brought home from the Middle East and Militia units were sent to Papua New Guinea to create history on the Kokoda Track and at Milne Bay. Caloundra became more or less a military town. Some families left for fear of Japanese bombing while those who remained

needed passes to live in the town which had become a restricted area.

## **ENTRY PASS**

Homes, boats and vehicles were commandeered. Even the Mets surfboat was commandeered by the Navy.

Many of the houses on the northern side of Burgess Street between Alfred and Ernest Streets were taken over by the Army, **19A & 19 BURGESS ST**

They including these two homes which are still there today. Other buildings around the town were requisitioned as kitchens, storehouses and recreation areas.

Later in the war, the triangle of Regent (Bowman Rd), Arthur and Mary Streets; between Minchinton St and Bowman Rd; and at Lake Currimundi housed American soldiers.

## **CHRISTMAS IN CAMP**

Australian soldiers from a variety of units lived in camps set up south of the racecourse. Here men of the Militia 29/46<sup>th</sup> Battalion enjoy Christmas lunch in 1942 while performing garrison duty on the Sunshine Coast. Two months later it left for Milne Bay to protect the base set up after the battles of the previous August-September.

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The earlier Dicky Beach camp became the major site in the area.

## **DICKY BEACH MAP** Pic SC

It extended from Tooway Creek to Lake Currimundi and almost to the present-day Nicklin Way. (Point out creeks and Beerburrum Street)

## **GUARD AT TOOWAY** Pic SC

Guard posts were manned at Tooway Bridge to control access to the tented Camp. These men were members of the 2/26<sup>th</sup> Battalion which later fought their way down the Malayan Peninsula before being taken prisoner in Singapore.

## **BRIDGE** AWM

Army engineers built a bridge across Lake Currimundi to allow access to the training area north to the present-day Kawana and beyond. The bridge was built many times as different engineer units practiced skills they'd need in the push through the islands.

## **SWIMMERS** Pic SC

Swimmers could still use Kings Beach, but had to negotiate coils of barbed wire to get to the surf. Machine-gun barrels poked from emplacements at each end of the beach. Farlow's Family Store at the corner of the Esplanade and De Vene Avenue Kings Beach doubled as a machine-gun position, with a sandbagged hole cut into the floor and manned throughout the night.

Mortar positions were set up on the headlands at Caloundra and overlooking Moffatt Beach, set to fire on Kings, Shelley, Moffatt and Dicky Beaches if needed while later anti-aircraft guns and artillery were installed.

## **BREN GUN CARRIERS** AWM

What had been the peace and quiet of a small village was shattered by the clatter of Bren gun carriers through suburban



streets and military vehicles were everywhere, replacing civilian vehicles which all but disappeared due to petrol rationing.

## **SCHOOL HQ**

The Caloundra State School was taken over by the Army and classes, in shifts, were transferred to the Scout Hall in Orsova Avenue. The street leading to the Headquarter were controlled by armed guards.

Many families dug air raid shelters and trenches ran along the coast from Dicky Beach to Currimundi.

The Militia 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade, with Battalions raised in Brisbane and Toowoomba, prepared defensive positions around Caloundra. Each battalion took it in turn, month-about, to travel from their base at Chermside to stand-by in case of attack.

When the 7<sup>th</sup> Division came home from the Middle East, many of its units were accommodated on the Sunshine Coast, at Woodford, Strathpine and Caboolture and trained in the Blackall Ranges.

During the Coral Sea Battle in May 1942, when a Japanese fleet heading for Port Moresby was turned back by the American fleet, an artillery regiment was deployed inland from Caloundra and troops all along the coast, particularly in the Bribie Island Forts, were put on stand-by.

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I'd like to take a small side-trip here, although it still has direct relevance to the area and the story.

The Brisbane Line.

With all the military activity between the NSW border and Gympie, with troops deployed up and down the coast in huge numbers – in the Landsborough Shire alone there were 12,000 servicemen and women at any one time – and the threat of invasion on everyone's mind, it's probably no wonder rumours of a defence line beginning in Brisbane had (and still has in some quarters) credence.

It began when New South Wales firebrand politician Eddie Ward accused the Menzies Government in the October 1942 election campaign of having had a plan to abandon Northern Australia in the event of a Japanese invasion.

The line was variously regarded to be from Brisbane to Perth, Brisbane to Adelaide or Brisbane to Melbourne.

It had its genesis in a proposal by the GOC Home Forces, Lieutenant General Iven Mackay, who'd been appointed by the Menzies Government in September 1941 and tasked with preparing a plan to repel a Japanese invasion.

With the limited troops and equipment available at that time -- most of our Forces were fighting overseas -- his plan was to concentrate on the defence of vital population, industrial, transport and resource centres of the country, which, at the time were on the east and southern coasts south of Brisbane.

By the time the proposal was presented to the War Cabinet in February 1942, there'd been a change of Government and it was rejected.

A Royal Commission found that Mackay's proposal was a military one based on considerations of military factors and

relating to resources available and the situation in February 1942. It also found that no other such proposals were put to the War Cabinet or Advisory War Council before February 1942 or that Curtin Ministers who were members of the War Cabinet and previously members of the Advisory War Council were nowhere recorded supporting Wards claims.

The facts were not helped by a mention by General MacArthur in a 1943 Press conference of a Brisbane Line extending from Brisbane to Perth. Pressed by reporters, he later distanced himself from the comment.

Writing his reminiscences of his time in Australia, he said (probably referring to General Mackay's proposal) that the Australian General Staff planned to defend Australia on a line that followed the Darling River from Brisbane to Adelaide but he decided that the way to stop the Japanese was to attack them before they got to Australia. Typically, he didn't mention that it was also Curtin's policy at the time.

There WAS a discussion by the Advisory War Council and State Premiers in February 1942 regarding a plan to evacuate civilians and essential industry from vulnerable areas and the subsequent formulation of evacuation plans by Qld, NSW and WA but these related to civilian evacuation from battle areas and not the military abandonment of a territory.

In spite of many denials and detailed research by authors and historians, the rumours still persist. – usually based on personal stories of wartime 'evacuation orders', local troop activity and fortification construction..... or just plain Chinese whispers.

The controversy is covered in Appendix 4 of the Official History of World War 2 – Civil - Volume 2 - Government and the People 1942-1945.

### **US ARMY ARRIVE** AWM

The Americans came to Caloundra in 1942. Hundreds passed through the area to be trained as radar operators before moving north to join their combat units. The training unit had some 600 soldiers at any one time, including 200 permanent staff. The Americans commandeered private homes but paid rent to the owners.

### **BEACH CABINS**

Beach cabins at the corner of Seaview Terrace and Bryce Street, right on Moffatt Beach were also leased.

In 1943, on the departure of the Americans north, the RAAF established Radar Station 24, with a complement of 25 Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) and 14 RAAF airmen.

### **CENTAUR** AWM

There's a story that station staff spotted the Japanese submarine the afternoon before it sank the hospital ship Centaur in May 1943. An operator, checking a radar 'blip' had a visual sighting of a submarine just off the coast at Caloundra but was told by the Navy that he must have been mistaken because they had no submarines in the area. In the early hours of May 14, the Centaur was torpedoed with the loss of 268 lives.

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Throughout the war, local people took the visitors into their hearts. Many families “adopted” men far from home and social functions like dances, card nights, **CAMPFIRE** Groves and simple entertainment like singalongs and campfires were popular.

The Servicemen and women took every opportunity to get away from the boredom and routine of camp life. Comino’s and other cafes provided a break from Army cooking while some of the pre-war guest houses opened their doors for a relaxed atmosphere on the monthly 48-hour leave.

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The hospitality extended to overseas visitors, apart from the hundreds of Americans based or training in the area.

The American Red Cross took over the Strathallen Guest House at Lower Gay Terrace just up from Bulcock Beach for refugees and soldiers smuggled out of the Philippines by submarine.

Refugee children went to school, drilled not to reveal where they came from so as to protect those left behind.

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## **RATION BOOKS** Groves

For some, the hospitality came with sacrifice. Meat, butter, tea and sugar were rationed. 500g of tea had to last five weeks, a kilo of sugar a fortnight, 500g of butter a fortnight and a just a kilo of meat a week. I well-remember getting into trouble for losing the butter-ration card on my way home from the shop. I was only four, so I like to think I was probably too young to have

been sent to the shop with such a valuable document. But that's what it was like in those days.

The large suburban block allowed a certain amount of self-sufficiency – my grandmother had her own cow -- and many families grew fruit and vegetables. Of course Caloundra's reputation for good fishing helped a lot.

Occasionally, a serviceman or woman – particularly Americans – would supplement their hosts' supplies with items 'liberated' from the cookhouse. And fortunately, fish, sausage, chicken rabbit and ham were not rationed.

### **VICTORY FIREWORKS** AWM

VE day – Victory in Europe – in May 1945 had little impact on those whose focus was on the war with Japan. It provided a glimmer of hope for the future, but Australians were still fighting in the Islands and thousands remained as prisoners of the Japanese in Thailand, Singapore, Borneo and Japan.

Caloundra continued to be a significant military area. While Camp Dicky Beach had all-but closed down by 1944, the area north of Lake Currimundi was still an important training area.

### **TANK CO-OP EXERCISE** AWM

Men of the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Armoured Regiment and their Grant tanks and Infantry soldiers prepared for the Liberation of Balikpapan in July 1945. The Regiment was held back from the operation to carry out further training for the invasion of Malaya – Operation Zipper – but the end of the war cancelled the operation.

### **BOGIE WHEEL REPLACEMENT** AWM

I found this interesting photo, taken in the training area, which I think is a typically 'can-do' example of Digger ingenuity. Faced with the replacement of bogie wheels on a 30-ton tank, they've used a bulldozer to lift the side up high enough to do the job.

### **VP DAY** AWM

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought the Japanese surrender on 14 August 1945 but it would be many years before Caloundra shook off it's wartime cloak. Rationing continued until 1947 for sugar, 1948 for meat and clothing, and 1950 for butter and tea. Requisitioned buildings were returned – often the worse for wear but almost impossible to repair due to the shortage of building materials. The Metropolitan lifesavers surf boat, however, was returned by the Navy, overhauled and seaworthy.

The barbed wire that had lined the beaches was replaced by holiday campers' tents and caravans and new people – often people who'd served in the area - moved in to take up permanent residence.

### **WEDDING PHOTO** Pic SC

This couple met at a dance in Caloundra while the groom was serving at Fort Bribie and the bride as a driver at Coastal Artillery Headquarters.

### **TODAY**

The Servicemen and women who spent time at in the area wouldn't recognise their wartime home today. Forty-seven

years after the end of the war we've grown into a city nearly 30 times larger than in the immediate post-war years.

Progress – and mother nature – have all-but wiped out the visible remains of buildings, emplacements and defences that were so quickly and laboriously-built in the face of the threat of invasion.

But some remnants are there if you know where to look – Fort Bribie hasn't been entirely eaten up by erosion and regrowth. The stub-ends of metal posts that held barbed wire across the rock shelves below Moffatt headland have survived the wash of thousands of tides and a gun pit used as a beach shower for many years at Moffat Beach may be remembered by some of you.

Suburbs have been built on the former Camp Dicky Beach and the firing ranges north to Kawana and even as far as Coolum – in spite of the hundreds of live artillery and mortar shells that surfaced during construction. So many were found in the late 1970s that a Maroochydore policeman was trained to identify live and practice shells to reduce the almost daily run by Army bomb disposal staff from Brisbane.

## **BATTERY HILL**

Sub-division of Battery Hill echoed the area's military connection. Matilda Street may not be recognised for its military connection on its own, but put it together with Sherman, Grant and Crusader Streets, Blamey and Rowell, Vickers and Bren Streets and all becomes clear.

## **VIEW TODAY**



Today the view from near the Fire Command Headquarters down the North-West Channel that was such a focus during the war has little to show for its wartime importance.

Peace brought population and prosperity. The period of disruption, excitement, sadness and laughter that was World War 2 for the residents has faded into a dimness enlightened only by people like the Groves and Anne Wensley.

Before I finish up, I'd like to acknowledge the Australian War Memorial and the Sunshine Coast Council's Picture Sunshine Coast; John and Janice and Anne and indeed all the authors of, and contributors to, the various publications I've accessed.

The presentation would have been nothing without them.

### **Further Reading**

If you'd like to learn more about Caloundra and Bribie Island in World War 2, I'd recommend these ---

### **BOOK LIST**

--- all of which are available in our CFHRI Library.

And I'm sure John, Janice and Anne will be happy to help you with your own copy of their books here today.

Thank you.

Ian Edwardson

13 Aug 2022