

Information about the gun emplacements and military activities in 1942 around Fort Tomaree, near Nelson Bay, New South Wales, Australia.



The number 1 surf gun emplacement (3 pounder) in 1997

In the early 1940s Port Stephens was a large natural harbour close to the vulnerable, yet essential steelworks of Newcastle. Australia was at war with Japan. An unguarded Port Stephens could have provided an easy landing place for any hostile force.

The guns at Newcastle were too far away to provide protection for Port Stephens.

By the end of 1942 Fort Tomaree was constructed and ready, with two "six inch" (152mm) guns, torpedo tubes, mortars, machine guns, rifle pits, search lights, command posts, observation posts, barbed wire entanglements and accommodation.

The guns were never fired in anger. Their installation did however provide peace of mind and the facilities for artillery training.

Nearby, at Nelson Bay, the Joint Overseas Operating Training School (JOOTS) was being set up to handle courses for officers and men of the U.S. and Australian Armed Forces. The bays and beaches of Port Stephens provided training for 2000 Australian and 20,000 U.S. ship-to-shore invasion specialists.

The base for JOOTS was H.M.A.S. Assault. Here the three armed services co-operated in their efforts to recapture territory lost to the Japanese.

With the war moving closer to Japan, the Amphibious Training Centre was closed on October 12th 1943, after only a year of operation.

From then until the end of hostilities on the 15th of August 1945, the military facilities around Port Stephens played only a minor role in supply and training. Gan Gan Army Camp, 4km from Nelson Bay was a troop staging and training area. The buildings there consisted of kitchens, mess, toilets and ablution blocks. The troops lived in tents.

The guns of Tomaree have gone. What remains are gun emplacements, observation and command posts, and the foundations of many of the structures.

Some of the buildings were taken over by Tomaree Lodge and still stand today. Tomaree Lodge is owned by the State Government and is currently run as a mental institution. The eastern three quarters of Tomaree Headland is part of Tomaree National Park.



Photo of one of the 6 inch guns on Tomaree 1942

Extract from a letter to Prime Minister Menzies from the House of Representatives, Canberra dated 8th November, 1940.

"The then Minister for the Navy, presumably as a considered reply, said that he would not like to attempt to take a ship into Port Stephens as the batteries at Stockton would make the entrance untenable. I find on measuring up the various positions on the map that the distance of these guns from the entrance exceeds the range of the weapons by some 6km.

As you know the munitions and war effort of the Commonwealth largely depends upon the heavy industries situated round the shore of Port Hunter. In addition at Williamstown, some 16km to the north of Newcastle, the Commonwealth has recently built a

very large aerodrome. I am aware of the fact that it is for training purposes but nevertheless it is the only aerodrome in the Newcastle District capable of landing machines of the Douglas and Lockheed type. As was demonstrated recently when the party of American journalists visited that city in a Douglas plane. As well there is situated adjacent to it the auxiliary supply of the Hunter River Water Board. From the sand beds here, I understand, the Board proposes to draw 63,000,000 litres of water per day, an amount equal to the Chichester supply, and essential for the industries located at Port Hunter. While at Hexham the supply pipe from Chichester is above ground and could easily be destroyed with a few charges of gun cotton. The whole of this most important area is very vulnerable to any mechanised raiding force landed in Port Stephens. And yet there is nothing to prevent them so landing and nothing to hinder them for many hours in any advance which they might make to destroy the B.H.P. and other works as well as the Aerodrome and waterworks."

Laurie Leckie spent 5 months in 1943 at the 20RS site.

"The Americans were everywhere at that time - heavy concentrations round Nelson Bay and numerous camps in the then bush off the Newcastle to Nelson Bay Road.

We usually relied on their transports (trucks) when going on leave back to Newcastle hitching rides - ex Newcastle usually picking them up at the ferry crossing. We also got lifts on Australian Army trucks and Air Force trucks.

One of our good shifts was the evening shift when we would go up earlier and cook our own tea in the serviceable kitchen that was part of the doover. We always had lashings of mashed potato. We took our rations up with us and prepared everything in the kitchen.

The Army battery was further round the rock facing out to sea - but I can only recall one visit to have a look at their set up.

Sometimes when "off shift" we would explore the coast/beaches on ocean side South from Tomaree. There were barbed wire entanglements along the beach.

Our main job at 20 was plotting flight movements ex RAAF Williamstown, plus all flight movements along the coast in our vicinity."

The following memories of 20RS were written by C. E. (Ted) Williams and first appeared in "More Radar Yarns".

"Tomaree is essentially a huge boulder about 500 feet high, and forms the southern headland of the entrance to Port Stephens, which, incidentally, is an excellent deep water port. It was officially Fort Tomaree, and housed about 500 Army men, but there was also a contingent of Garrison Infantry, "The Old and Bold", all WWI veterans. There were also a few Navy types for ship recognition.

Mains power had not yet been brought through, so we would have to rely on a stand-by unit, a 25KVA Ford V8.

When we drew up to the bottom of the "hill", we saw that there were two ways to the top. The people who had erected the building had constructed a miniature railway going up the hill at an angle of 45° with a trolley operated by a cable and winch. The alternative was a narrow path which zig-zagged its way to the top. Needless to say, for some reason which eludes me now, we were unable to use the trolley, and obviously we would have to do this job the hard way, a man on the corner of each cabinet, with frequent changes of men, and much loss of sweat. (The receiver cabinet weighed 1000 pounds and the transmitter 1200). Up to this time, most of our experience with NCO's had been DI's, and I am quite certain that the example set by Scotty and Ray, influenced us all, when we too became NCO's.

When we finally made it to the top, we found that everything had been prepared for us. The aerial was all matched up, the RF switch was mounted on the wall, and it was obvious where we were to position the transmitter and receiver. There was even a duct under the floor to take the synchronizing cable from the receiver to the transmitter. Unfortunately we could not use it because the conduit was too small to take the PT29M which was the only cable that we had.

So, late in the afternoon of Sunday 12 April 1942, 20RS became operational, three weeks to the day after 31RS at Darwin.

Now we must admit that the steel mesh and concrete camouflage was incomplete, and on going on my first leave to Newcastle, the unpainted mortar stood out like a sore thumb.

Because of the dangers of the patch, it was decided to run eight hour shifts, midnight to 8 am etc. The Boss quickly organized bunks, for anyone who didn't want to risk the path in darkness: most decided to take the chance.

One of the lovely things about this camp, was that the Army had a wet canteen. Life was indeed

Not long after this I was thoroughly caught out one night when I was on the dog watch. The Boss had told me that W/Cdr Pither was paying us a visit and would be arriving about midnight. Therefore would I apply a bit of spit and polish so that the place looked good when Mr Pither inspected it. About 0100 hours when the plotting board operator was curled up on the floor alongside the plotting board, and I was thinking that I had better start some cleaning up, there was a loud knock at the door. Fortunately this woke up my sleeping beauty who scrambled onto his chair, because when I opened the door, there was the Boss with the Wing Commander.

Luckily the place was not too messy, but the Boss did give me a rather reproachful look. However, I put it to you, what other "stranger" would be so foolhardy as the climb that path at 0100 hours. Perhaps it was this ability that permitted George Pither to achieve so much in radar.

In due course, this mains power came through, and our rather worn standby-by unit was relegated to its proper task, with an off-duty operator sleeping alongside it in case of power failure.

Also about this time, stresses caused by high winds knocked a few teeth off a cog in the aerial turning gear. This put us off the air for a few days until the NSW Government Railways came galloping to the rescue with a replacement gear made from stronger steel. For me, climbing out to the end of the array to fasten a rope so that we could stop it thrashing around, was just a foretaste of some of my future RAAF activities.

Soon after this we had our tragedy. One of the replacement mechanics, along with one of the operators, was rock-fishing when a freak wave got them both. One body was recovered but not the other. At this stage, I discovered that there was more to being a corporal than going to the head of the meal line. The CO gave me the job of going through belongings, and making an inventory. This rather harrowing experience contributed to the growing up of a corporal who had celebrated his nineteenth birthday at Tomaree.

Somewhere about the three month mark, I had the dog watch, and went up to the radar about 2200 hours, to find Jacky in a state of near panic. The screen was so filled with interference that the station was effectively off the air. After a bit of elimination, we tracked the problem down to the transmitter blower, which, while quite adequate for aircraft use, was quite unsuitable for continuous operation, where 1000 hours was run up every six weeks.

A vacuum cleaner seemed to be the best solution as a stop-gap, so we roused the CO out of the Officers' Mess. He in turn roused the Fitter DMT and gave him a purchase order, and despatched him to Newcastle with instructions to find a shop where the owner lived on the premises, and which furthermore, had a vacuum cleaner for sale.

The Fitter DMT did his job well, and by 0600 hours we were back on the air with the vacuum cleaner propped up on a log. It "held the fort" nobly, until a really suitable blower turned up in two or three weeks. Since this blower was now located outside the building, we had a much quieter operations room.

By now the equipment had got over its birth pangs, and had settled down to a relatively trouble free existence. This gave us time for such niceties as painting the concrete floor to control dust, etc.

Sometime during July around 1530 hours we spotted a periscope travelling northwards so it was promptly reported to Fighter Sector. Time went by, we followed its straight line path for about an hour. Nothing happened until about 1800 hours when a Walrus appeared to survey the scene, of course by then the submarine had long since departed leaving us to wonder about the activities of Fighter Sector."

FORT TOMAREE

Port Stephens is a superb natural harbour with the two distinctive peaks of Yacaaba and Tomaree marking the entrance. Visible from the water are a number of concrete structures dating from the early days of World War Two. 1942 was a worrying year for Australia as Darwin was bombed and a number of coastal cities were shelled, including nearby Newcastle. Fort Tomaree was constructed to protect Port Stephens. The main defensive weapons were two six inch (152mm) guns, capable of penetrating 150mm of steel at 14 kilometres. Their purpose was to sink shipping. The stated aim of Fort Tomaree was "to deny the use of the Port to an attacking force". Troops were housed in buildings now taken over by Tomaree Lodge. Most of the relics that were part of Fort Tomaree lie in Tomaree National Park.

The guns were never fired in anger and it is not known where they ended up. The massive concrete structures that housed the guns are accessible by a walking track from the car park at Zenith Beach.

At the water's edge a jetty was built to hold two torpedo tubes, a last defence against enemy shipping. Two other gun emplacements housed three pounder guns known as the 'surf battery', to provide defence against fast moving vessels. Fort Tomaree also had anti-aircraft guns, searchlights, observation posts and plotting rooms. An Air Force early warning radar was located at the top of the hill.

For over half a century these reinforced concrete structures have survived the wear of salt spray and curious visitors. They stand a silent seaward watch, their job completed.

Some of the above comes from my book "The Guns of Tomaree" by Michael Smith and Graeme Steinbeck.

If you would like a copy E-MAIL The Port Stephens Visitors Centre (info@portstephens.org.au) with your request and they will issue

you with instructions on how to get a copy. The book will cost about \$5, plus postage. The Port Stephens Visitors Centre can be phoned on 1800808900.

In 1994 Graeme Steinbeck wandered into the Port Stephens Visitors Centre and showed the staff there photographs of the actual Tomaree six inch guns. Graeme, a keen military historian, had spent years climbing over the headland trying to make sense of the blockhouses, concrete slabs, railway tracks and rusted metal left there.

As a keen bushwalker I was able to add a bit more information and a 20 page book "The Guns of Tomaree" was printed in mid 1994.

That edition included a contact number for anyone who had more information. For years tantalizing snippets passed under my gaze. Maps, photographs, personal recollections and my own discoveries on the hillside added to what had already been included in the book. The result was a 36 page book, the second edition.

One thousand copies were printed in 1998.

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