

WA'S PEARL HARBOUR: THE SUBMERGED AIRCRAFT WRECKS OF BROOME

On 1 October 2003, Dr. Mike McCarthy gave a polished talk on an investigation he directed into the flying boats that were destroyed by a Japanese aerial attack at Broome during World War II. Mike is the Curator of Maritime Archaeology at the W.A. Maritime Museum.

The investigation was carried out to support a successful nomination to the Heritage Council of W.A. to have the flying boat wreckage site at Broome entered in the Register of Heritage Places. The aim of the nomination was to provide for control of entry to the site and legal protection from looters or from interested organisations wishing to salvage relics. The site is rare as there are no other sites of such visible damage as a reminder of wartime attacks on Australia.

The 15 aircraft destroyed were participating in an effort to evacuate 8000 civilians from Java in 1942 in the face of the Japanese invasion of Indonesia. They had landed at Broome to refuel. The refuelling time and low tide delayed their departure for Perth and left them exposed to the attack by Japanese warplanes on the morning of 3 March 1942.

Most of the pilots, many of whom had gone without rest for days, were ashore overnight resting and preparing for the flight south. Unfortunately there was no accommodation for the passengers, who remained on board the aircraft. The numbers are not known, but it has been estimated that there were up to 50 on each aircraft. In the carnage that followed between 70 to 100 were killed in the raid including those on land. Only 30 bodies from the aircraft were ever recovered.

The 6 aircraft wrecks appearing on the mudflats at low tide have long been a source of fascination as a reminder of the horrors of war. By 1980 the appearance of the wrecks had been substantially altered due to removal of parts of the aircraft, much of which had taken place during the war. Few known attempts had been made to excavate within the mud filled hulls due to the difficulties imposed by the ingress of water and mud during tidal movements. An excavation in a Dornier wreck by aviation historian Stan Gadja in the 1970s showed that the interior of the wrecks are a rich source of artefacts.

Nine of the wrecks sank in deep water in the shipping channel or they sank onto the sloping mud bank at the side of the channel where their actual locations were soon forgotten. At the time of Gadja's excavation these wrecks had not been relocated, except perhaps by fishermen not keen to divulge the location to others.

In 1980 as a result of concerns by the Shire of Broome about the projected salvage of relics by Perth and Eastern States aviation history groups it was ascertained that

the American and Australian aircraft wrecks were the property of the Australian Government whilst the Dutch aircraft remained under the ownership of that Government.

Then in 1990, divers located some of the wrecks and recovered a machine gun and a number of significant artefacts including a child's doll. As The W.A. Heritage Act was not in force at the time, the Broome Historical Society contacted a number of official bodies including the WA Maritime Museum, as a result of which loose legislative protection was given under air navigation and customs regulations which prohibited removal of material from wrecked aircraft and prohibited importation of aircraft parts without a permit. These regulations were made known to the divers and the looting ceased.

A management strategy was put in place by the Broome Historical Society, the RAAF Aviation Museum and the WA Maritime Museum. This included long term plans to locate, survey, interpret and mark all sites in a wreck trail "milieu" to be managed by the Broome Historical Society. Sponsorship was sought for funding but until this occurred the Broome Historical Society monitored visits to the sites. However, with the advent of the GPS and increasing interest in the deep water sites, it was evident that the loose legislative protection in place, possibly largely consisting of bluff, could not be relied upon for long.

Then in 1991 Woodside Petroleum and Associated Survey International assisted the Museum in carrying out survey work using a large boat and side scan sonar. A number of sites were identified but gear failure and the need for further funds for the Museum to inspect the sites halted this work.

Various funding proposals, including a proposed film by noted aviation photographer Jon Davison, came to nought until, using Davison's proposal, a "Shipwrecks Detective" series including the Broome Aircraft Wrecks was developed and accepted by Prospero Productions. This provided funds needed to complete the survey and inspection of the wrecks. So at last in 2001, assisted by Prospero, the Museum carried out further side scan sonar work resulting in the location of 15 sites including some very clear images. At the same time interviews resulted in the compilation of a comprehensive oral history. Jeremy Green led the remote sensing and Corioli Souter the oral history programs. Finally, a site inspection and test excavating regime was commenced under Mike's leadership. Great assistance was provided by Broome residents, notably Jeff Parker and John Lashmar of the Broome Historical Society.

Some of the images projected by Mike showed the aircraft in configurations that indicated they had burnt close to the waterline before they sank, with the wings and tail planes collapsing around the hulls as they sank. Much of the wrecks and their

contents were quickly covered with deep layers of mud providing an anaerobic environment allowing even quite fragile objects to remain preserved.

The investigation into the wrecks and their history was incorporated into the WA Maritime Museum Report No 170 to provide documentation for entry into the Register of Heritage Places. At the end of 2002, this resulted in Dr Judy Edwards, the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, publishing a Conservation Order for the protection of the wreck sites under the terms of the Heritage of Western Australia Act 1990.

Large portions of some of the wrecks were missing and the reason for this was not clear until Daphne Edinger contacted Mike with further information. At the conclusion of his address he asked Daphne to speak about this. Daphne knew that her father, Claude Choules, now aged 102 and the oldest Naval Veteran in Australia, had been involved with clearing some of these wrecks, so she asked him for details. He told her the wrecks in the navigation channel had to be removed because the site was needed for a Catalina base. At the time Claude was a Chief Petty Officer and the Navy's demolition expert, stationed at HMAS Leeuwin in Fremantle. He was sent to Broome with a team of 4 divers to blow up the wrecks and clear the channel. A small vessel; HMAS King Bay, of some 50–60 feet was commandeered and, with a crew, Claude and the divers set sail for Broome. They were in Broome for three months from December 1942 to February, and working every day they blew the aircraft into segments they could handle with a derrick on the vessel. These were transported to deep water beyond the 100 m line where they would not be washed back in again. And so the mystery was solved after 50 years of doubt. This important information is presently being pursued by student Silvano Jung, who is completing the work started by the Museum as part of his Doctorate.

Daphne Choules Edinger and Gilbert Marsh