

## **WORLD WAR II AND THE KIMBERLEY**

In June 1995, Lindsay Peet tantalised the Kimberley Society audience with little known information about events that occurred during the Second World War. The combat period covered by the talk ranged from 20 February 1942, when the Japanese attacked the vessel *Koolama*, to July 1944, when the last Japanese aircraft over the Kimberley was shot down by a RAF (British) Spitfire at Truscott Air Base.

The Kimberley came under different commands, initially Java, then Perth, and later Darwin. The forces on the Allied side were the Australian Army, Navy and Air Force (including a Dutch squadron within the RAAF), three RAF fighter squadrons, and the United States Navy air arm (Catalinas) and Army Air Forces (Liberator Bombers). The RAAF had five significant air bases as well as an air defence headquarters in the Kimberley. There were eight radar stations, mostly on the coast, two American LORAN stations, and RAAF Marine Sections to look after the Catalinas. The Flying Doctor Service, based in Wyndham, provided a Volunteer Air Observer Corps communications network for the RAAF. Army activities included setting up guerilla groups on Kimberley stations in 1942 and providing them with uniforms and weapons so they would be ready to react to any Japanese landing. Another interesting army group was the Northern Australia Observer Unit ("Curtin's Cowboys") which had headquarters at Ivanhoe station. The signal traffic generated by this unit attracted the attention of Japanese radio intelligence teams in Timor and gave the impression that a large force was stationed in the East Kimberley.

Activities in the Kimberley constituted a vital link in the defence of Northern Australia, providing, amongst other things, an air garrison against the Japanese in the Lesser Sunda Islands. Enemy operations there were virtually paralysed by 1945, with the Japanese having insufficient ships to move their troops out. Earlier attacks had forced the Japanese to move their main air base northward from Koepang. Operations conducted mainly out of Drysdale, Truscott and West Kimberley bases created a threat perception which held enemy troops away from New Guinea where General McArthur's forces were advancing. In 1945, American Liberators flying out of Truscott attacked Japanese gun emplacements on Lombok Island, with the air crew competing for cases of Swan Lager as an added incentive to score hits!

The limited attacks mounted from the Kimberley against the enemy in Java included one successful Australian Liberator attack out of Truscott. Aerial mine laying also took place in Java and Borneo, with RAAF flying boats initially operating out of Cygnet Bay, then Yampi Sound, and lastly West Bay east of Truscott. The highly secret base at Cockatoo Island in Yampi Sound was code named "She Cat". These flying boats had to go in very low on a fixed path, taking high risks. Several Catalinas were lost.

The Japanese forces in Timor were only about 500 kms from the north Australian coast and, of the 22 air attacks they mounted, 15 affected the Kimberley. Five attacks on Broome resulted in the destruction of 23 aircraft and the loss of about 100 lives. More lives were lost at Kalumburu (Drysdale); Derby airport was strafed; and there were three attacks on Wyndham.

Enemy personnel involved in operations relevant to the Kimberley were attached to submarines belonging to the Imperial Japanese Navy and to aircraft belonging to both the Navy and the Army. Submarine raids included the laying of 39 mines in shipping lanes in Joseph Bonaparte Gulf in January 1942. The Army was responsible for two surface incursions, one at Cape Leveque in August 1944 when an enemy ship, the *Bandeong Maru* was captured and one, which was never detected, at York Sound. The latter saw the Japanese land at the mouth of the Moran River for two days, in January 1944, looking for an Allied base. The hour-long 8 mm film they made at the time does not seem to have survived.

The slides accompanying Lindsay's talk included war graves and remnants of buildings and aircraft, particularly in the Truscott area on the Anjo Peninsula (classified by the National Trust). Of much interest was a series on the "Shady Lady", a Liberator that crash landed on a salt pan on the Peninsula in August 1943. After major repairs, made possible by assistance rendered by Aboriginal people from Kalumburu, it flew out again sporting a wooden nose!

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