

# SKETCHES by BEACH HISTORIANS

## WAR at MISSION BEACH

This Sketch is about events in the Mission Beach district during World War II. A full version of this story is available, so this will focus more on what has been claimed to happen here but **did not occur**, rather than all that did. That is an odd focus perhaps, yet correcting myths and misinformation is important, as much has been said in the past that is far from true. Some things have been accepted and cited from one publication to another and like a tumbleweed these fantasies have gathered momentum and belief.

### RAAF Myths

A simple example of an unfortunate mis-statement that is readily refuted is an assertion that the secret RAAF Radar Station at Dunk Island, *played a significant role in the pivotal Battle of the Coral Sea.*

Even Edmund Banfield's astute biographer, Michael Noonan, in his book, *A Different Drummer*, was tricked by that error and repeated it. It is easy to access the critical dates for such an event. Two dates matter: the date of completion of this important piece of infrastructure on Dunk Island and the dates of the battle itself. The station was completed on Christmas day 1942 and commissioned shortly after while the Battle of the Coral Sea occurred on 4-8 May 1942; almost seven months before the radar station was even operating.

The station operated during the war though and did play a small role in assisting the Allied forces during the Pacific War after the Battle of the Coral Sea. People like to tell stories of that incredibly important event and to be linked to it in some way. However, none of the towns in the Cassowary Coast were involved in that battle. When the US and Australian vessels involved in the battle returned, they moored at Cid Harbour in the Whitsunday's and in Brisbane and came nowhere near the Cassowary Coast.

Another untrue story linked to the Dunk RAAF radar station was the tale of ... *a landing of Asian strangers wearing new United States Army uniforms. ... on a special mission to Dunk Island where there was an Air Force radar base. ... The men stayed a week, leaving each day to paddle up and down the coast. ... I have no doubt these were Japanese soldiers passing themselves off as Yanks while dressed in captured US uniforms, reconnoitring the coast for a good way in for their subs.*

That is an interesting and quite credible sounding yarn. It was partly true. The formal war records show that these Asian soldiers arrived for a time at Mission Beach and kayaked around, then one day went to Dunk Island. However, they were captured by the RAAF and incarcerated for two weeks before it was determined they were US troops. It turns out that these soldiers were Netherlands East Indies members of M or Z Special Units of the US Service Reconnaissance Department who commonly landed along the coast and were often mistaken for Japanese. An intriguing story too, yet not quite as fascinating as the imagined version perhaps.

## Naval Fantasies

The most amazing claim made about the war at Mission Beach was a statement published in the *Cairns Post* later saying that, ... *the naval Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 ... was fought much nearer than people think and came very close to here [Mission Beach], only about 40 nautical miles off the coast.*

Wow, that's a beaut one. If it were true then every one of the myriad of books written of this battle are dead wrong for they show the battle being waged around New Guinea and the Solomons. Indeed, maps of the battle consistently show the nearest it came to Mission Beach was more than 1,000km away!

*War and Beach* by Ken Gray outlines all the war record evidence on the location of the battle. This research accessed the logbooks of 38 different Allied ships operating in the vicinity of the battle during all of May 1942. For the *Cairns Post* version to be so, it would mean that these logbooks were falsified by the Captains of each vessel and the Officers who wrote or signed their thrice-daily logs and coordinates. Today, the coordinates of the ships sunk in the battle are known exactly and confirm that the location was over 1,000km distance from here.

The inventor of this fanciful version of events obviously believed what many did during 1942, that the objective of the Japanese offensive in May 1942 was to invade mainland Australia. However, after the war, the records of the Japanese high command were revealed. These showed that the strategic plan was to encircle Australia, rather than invade it, and the objective of the May 1942 offensive was to land on New Guinea at Port Moresby. Fortunately, Japanese bombers spotted the flagship of the Allied cruiser task force, HMAS *Australia II*, south of New Guinea. They bombed it unsuccessfully then called off their planned invasion of Port Moresby.

The same people claimed that the aircraft carrier, HMAS *Melbourne* was at Dunk Island during the war. It was not built and commissioned until 1955: 13 years after the Battle of the Coral Sea.

In the same *Cairns Post* article, it was stated that .... *The remnant of the Pacific fleet was joined by ships from many nations, anchoring in a temporary naval base along about 3km of sheltered coast off Mission Beach. ... Corvettes and destroyers were posted at every gap between the coral islands to stop Japanese submarines getting through. ... There were subs working there every night of the week. ... we heard them surfacing and charging their batteries. ... Subs were sunk or captured, including a 2-man sub forced ashore at Mission Beach, and another sunk off Purtaboï Island.*

Unfortunately, that is about as true as a *Biggles* book. There was a mini-sub retrieved near the rocks at (North) Mission Beach. It was a British experimental mini-sub. The logbooks of all ships that came to the district in late 1942 and early 1943 were examined in detail when researching *War and Beach*. All vessels were either US Navy or RAN ships; there were no vessels from other nations here. There were no corvettes here, just Task Force 74 ships which included three cruisers (HMAS *Australia II*, HMAS *Hobart* and USS *Phoenix*) and nine destroyers (USS *Henley*, USS *Helm*, USS *Selfridge*, USS *Bagley*, USS *Mugford*, USS *Patterson*, USS *Ralph Talbot*, HMAS *Arunta* and HMAS *Warramunga*) plus a few oilers and supply ships. There were never more than 11 ships here at one time though.

As for Japanese subs being here, when you read the logbooks of naval vessels the entries are for most days quite mundane and uninteresting. Any hint of enemy sightings or action was always captured in great detail. The crews of vessels that sight, hear or take action to destroy an enemy sub are huge highlights. Any successful action like the sinking of an enemy sub created great excitement and led to recognition of the ship and its crew. No way on Earth a crew would not report such events. Yet there is not one ship among all those involved in Task 74 that ever reported hearing, sighting or acting against

any subs in this area. They certainly fired torpedoes in practice sessions at Mission Beach and occasionally lost the spent torpedoes. That was all reported in the logs. Once again, this is the fertile imagination of someone caught up in the excitement of war.

Events that did occur at Mission Beach during WWII were excitement enough without any embellishment. There was significant action here yet none of it involved direct engagement with the enemy. The local events were vital, however, for the success of the Allied forces in the Pacific War.

Perhaps the most important events occurring in the district were naval, with regular war exercises (bombing, shooting at dummy aircraft etc), repairing of ships, resupply of ships and critical rest and recreation periods for crews. At Mission Beach, Task Force 74 became supremely fit for battles they were soon engaged in across the Pacific.

## Secret Squirrel Stuff

The use of mustard gas and phosgene or other chemical warfare weapons was always controversial. The Japanese used it before WWII in their invasion of China, so the Allies were ever alert on the issue. When the Pacific Islands were being recaptured later in the Pacific War, there were some epic battles such as those at Peleliu Island, the Okinawa Islands and Tarawa Atoll where the American's lost many men. In some cases, the Japanese troops built almost impregnable concrete bunkers on the islands. The Allies considered using gas to shorten the war and save lives, and earlier in the war they tested and produced chemical weapons in case Japan used them.

This meant developing, storing and testing gas weapons which happened in many parts of Australia. In north Queensland, the major sites used were Proserpine, Mission Beach/Brook Islands and Mourilyan. There was a laboratory at Innisfail. The records on that gnarly subject were near to non-existent, but research for *War and Beach* uncovered the truth by accessing gas warfare historians, RAAF libraries (bomber logbooks) and the diaries of people directly involved and injured in the tests.

It was said by some, emphatically, that Mission Beach was not involved in gas testing, but locals said that they definitely were and most of their important evidence was vindicated. The truth was uncovered.

One artillery shell (shown below) was recovered from near Stoney Creek, near to Carmoo, and this was presumed to be a gas shell, but munitions experts determined from its fuse and markings that this was definitely a practice artillery shell, not a gas cartridge.



Recovered artillery shell from WWII at Mission Beach.

The many events that occurred in the district of Mission Beach are fascinating and quite surprising. One must remember that the district population at the time was not more than 50 people, so it was an ideal area to ‘fence off’ and experiment.

One may imagine that Australia’s Naval Task Force of cruisers and destroyers (Task Force 74) would mainly land at or visit the ports of Cairns and Townsville or even the small towns of Innisfail or Cardwell. However, while its destroyers visited Cairns or Townsville on rare occasions, mainly for mail, they never went to Innisfail or Cardwell. Cardwell somehow claimed the commemoration of the Battle of the Coral Sea as its own event but was not involved in this battle in any way. Cardwell and Innisfail ports were far too shallow for destroyers to access. Yet the Task Force often came, stayed for several days and worked at Mission Beach and its nearby islands. The Australian ports that received returning cruisers and destroyers from the Battle of the Coral Sea were Cid Harbour (Whitsundays) and Brisbane.

## War and Beach

For the full story of the war at Mission Beach there is an eBook, *War and Beach*; by Ken Gray, *Draft2Digital*, 2020. It is a 154-page history that relates all the WWII events in Mission Beach. The history was gleaned from war diaries, records and publications and from oral histories. It includes information on US and RAN war ships visiting this district and conducting war exercises here and on the RAAF’s activities on Dunk Island as well as the Army and Air force work, testing gas warfare chemicals on the mainland and on the Brook Islands. The book is available in the Mission Beach library on *Overdrive*. It is also available at most eBook online sellers such as *Amazon*, *iTunes* and *Kobo*. It costs \$5 on *Kobo* and is best seen on a colour screen (laptop, computer, phone or tablet) to read the graphics and images. It is necessary to download *Adobe Digital Editions* first, then the book, to read it in full colour.

*Author:* Ken Gray. *Editors:* Chris Forbes and Diane Bull.



*Published by* Mission Beach Historical Society, Document S001, Version 1.0. Web address: [mbhs.com.au](http://mbhs.com.au)  
This publication is copyright © Mission Beach Historical Society 2022. First published 2022.

Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this work may be stored, reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission. Inquiries should be addressed to the publisher. A record of this title is held at the National Library of Australia (Ebook) and the State Library of Queensland (Print and Ebook). The text and opinions expressed in this book are those of the author and of people interviewed by the author, and do not reflect the views of the Mission Beach Historical Society or its members.

Mission Beach Historical Society’s logo is designed by Leonard Andy, copyright © Leonard Andy. The design depicts a Djiru shield with a cassowary which is the endangered, iconic flightless bird living in the north Queensland rainforests.

The histories published by Mission Beach Historical Society are as accurate as we are able to make them. Few accounts of history are 100% correct and there are going to be more errors when we recall events of many years ago. We always welcome suggested edits, additions or deletions.