

War? What war?

By Shirley Jurmann

So it is 1939. War has been declared on the other side of the world. What does this mean for Moruya? Not much probably. The powers that be will remember the Great War, the war to end all wars. They will remember the horrendous loss of young lives. It will all be over by Christmas.

But it wasn't.

Life in country towns went on for some time much as it had been doing for years. Australian young men were being increasingly called up to support the mother country, England. Many local lads volunteered or were called up. Farmers and other essential occupations were exempt but a lot of the younger men were gone. Some joined up through a sense of responsibility, others with a desire for adventure. Some just wanted to get out of the situation they found themselves in, a boring life, maybe tied down with a wife and several young children. What a chance to see the world! Forgotten were the lessons of 1914-18.

Suddenly things began to get serious. Reports began to appear of severe injuries and deaths of local men on the battlefields of Europe. People were losing husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins. Japan joined the war and their soldiers were moving down through New Guinea. Australia was now in the firing line. The government saw that something had to be done to protect our coastline, but our resources were stretched and limited. Many of our young men were overseas. Who was available to defend us? Well, it got to be pretty bad when we had to rely on Pooh Bear and his Cave to protect Canberra!

Early on in the War, Moruya had been earmarked as one of a chain of Advance Operational Bases to be established around the Australian Coastline. Other such bases on the South Coast area were Nowra to the north and Mallacoota in Victoria. With Japan now advancing with threats of seaplanes, submarines and invasion early in 1942, instant action was called for. An Operational Base was established at Moruya with one RAAF Squadron at the Aerodrome with additional land on which a camp was to be built. A personnel strength of 3 officers and 53 other ranks would be based there.



By early 1942 building of the airfield, dispersal areas and taxiways had been completed. Some accommodation huts had been erected and an advance party of 16 airmen had arrived. In May the arrival of a further party of 1 officer and 44 airmen created difficulties with accommodation, bedding and rations. Some men were billeted in town until supplies could be brought from Nowra to solve the problems. The officer and his batman found accommodation with the Louttit family in Campbell Street. Demolition charges were set on the runways in case of enemy

landings. When all these problems were addressed, attention turned to the vegetable garden, started by the advance party. This was essential to keep up rationed food supplies and to keep some of the young airmen occupied in their spare time. One group, with little experience in farming, decided they wanted to grow watermelons. They borrowed a plough from Roy Louttit. With no tractor available they hitched it behind a large truck and went racing around the area they wanted to cultivate. As a result they bent the beam and returned the plough to Roy badly damaged. He was not impressed.

Japanese submarines were causing problems along the South Coast. By June 1942 Moruya was being visited by aircraft on anti-submarine patrols and convoy escort duties, as a refueling depot. Rations and accommodation were still a problem. Meat supplies were supplemented with local fish. Submarines were reported along the coast. The ship "William Dawes" was torpedoed off Tathra leaving 5 dead and several injured. 4 lifeboats of survivors were rescued. In July an aircraft engaged in anti-submarine operations had to make a forced landing resulting in considerable damage to the aircraft. Two submarines were sighted off Pambula River and a refueled aircraft took off from Moruya to search but with no result.

In August 1942 there was a big increase in enemy submarine activity along the coast. On 3rd August the people of Moruya were awoken in the early hours of the morning by the sounds of gunfire at sea and flashes of light could be seen from higher points in the town. The gunfire was coming from a Japanese submarine which was attacking the fishing trawler the "Dureenbee", which was captained by William Reid. The fishermen were busy hauling in 12 baskets of fish and had not noticed the submarine which had surfaced nearby. They only realised

they were under attack when the first shell passed over the ship. Reid gave orders for a change of course while Radio Operator Wilson signalled for help which was a long time coming. Aircraft loaded with bombs sat on the tarmac at Moruya waiting for telephoned permission from Melbourne, to take to the air, while the phone operator waited at the Court House for instructions. The submarine used the trawler as target practice for another 45 minutes before it headed out to sea when it heard the planes take off from the airport. If the planes in Moruya had been given immediate permission to take off when the distress signal was received they probably would have caught the submarine. One crew member of the "Dureenbee" was dead, two seriously injured and some other crew members had minor injuries.

Meanwhile back in Moruya, Police Sergeant H.A. Miller and Constable Bailey secured the services of Raynor and Harry McDiarmid and Cecil Williams and their boat the "Mirrabooka" to attempt to rescue the survivors and dead from the doomed "Dureenbee". The "Mirrabooka" was the fastest and biggest vessel available. Miller, Bailey and Allen Innes followed in a smaller pleasure craft. It was nearly 7 am, four hours after they were attacked that the men saw with great relief, the "Mirrabooka" approaching. A plane had guided it to its objective. The "Mirrabooka" dropped a dinghy and rescued the men. Retrieving the body of the dead man Arthur Scoble, the cook, was the most difficult part of the operation. He was a very large man, 22 stone, and it was impossible to get him into the dinghy. They had to attach a line, tow him through heavy swell to the rescue ship and winch him aboard. Archibald McPherson who was badly wounded, died on the journey back to Moruya while Alexander Reid died several days later in Moruya Hospital. All three men are buried in Moruya Cemetery under Merchant Navy headstones.

The McDiarmid brothers and Cec Williams later returned to the "Dureenbee" in an attempt to salvage her but her back was broken and they were driven off by heavy seas. The ship would later break up.

Police Sergeant Miller, Constable Bailey, Allen Innes, Raynor and Harry McDiarmid and Cec Williams would receive Royal Humane and Shipwreck Society Awards for their courage and tireless efforts shown throughout the whole incident.

Numerous sightings of submarine activities were investigated. On 4th September 1942 all land mines were withdrawn from the runway at Moruya but submarine investigations and seaward operations continued. In September 1943 an aircraft failed to return to Moruya. A search found it crashed on Pigeon House Mountain. All three crew members were killed. In December 1943 a plane had to make a forced landing 3 miles off Moruya Heads. The crew members were all rescued.

The merchant ship "Iron Knight" was torpedoed by a submarine off Montague Island on 8th February 1943. There were widespread searches from Moruya for survivors and the submarine. The French destroyer "Le Triomphant" rescued 14 survivors from a raft. Six sailors perished. Moruya Aerodrome continued to be a refueling depot and meal stop for planes on anti-submarine, convoy patrols, reconnaissance and training flights through 1943. Close co-operation was maintained with the Volunteer Defence Corps in case of any attack.



An important part of the defence of Australia in the dark days of the War was the Volunteer Defence Corps (VDC). It was formed in July 1940 and modelled on the British Home Guard. It was run by the government and the RSL and composed of volunteers who were either too old or were employed in essential industries and so not eligible for active service. Most of them had jobs and training was done mostly at night or weekends. Some of the members were retired World War I soldiers. Originally the government only supplied weapons, and not many of these, but from 1941 it supplied standard army uniforms. When Japan entered the War the numbers soared to over 100,000. Some men of the VDC served as Coast Watchers.

Moruya and Batemans Bay had their own VDC unit. John Gorrell, manager of the Batemans Bay Bank of NSW was the Commanding Officer at one stage and responsible for about 56 miles of coastline. John had served in World War I with the Australian Light Horse in Palestine. He was appointed as "Town Major (Quartermaster and Claims Officer) for the town of Bateman's Bay". His duties included the defence of Moruya Airport. The men trained in guerrilla warfare and devised schemes for local defence. They took part in activities such as presenting arms, marching, rifle drill, shooting and target shooting which was popular. The guns, when they finally got some, were old, maybe left over from the Boer War. They were worn out and it was difficult to even hit the side of a barn with them. The men trained on the beaches and headlands around Batemans Bay, Burrewarra Point and Moruya and in the local parks. As well as Batemans Bay and Moruya there were other local groups at places like Turlinjah, Bodalla, Narooma. They sometimes had

combined training sessions with groups taking part in skills competitions and mock capturing of areas of land and prisoners. Occasionally there were “Dad’s Army” situations where it was a wonder someone was not killed, such as a time when blank ammunition was accidentally replaced with live bullets. Meetings took place between the VDC and local farmers about what would need to be done in the event of an invasion. Cattle would need to



be driven up to the tablelands to ensure preservation of valuable herds but if the Japanese were successful in capturing Australia this would be of little use. The powers that be had little knowledge of what they were asking drovers to do. At a meeting in Bodalla they were told they should drive cattle, horses, pigs and “goats if any” up steep and dangerous sections of old historic droving tracks. Cattle, horses and pigs would have been hard enough but goats would have been impossible. They would have quickly disappeared up the steep cliffs, never to be seen again.

In July 1942 a corporal and 6 privates of the VDC moved into the Moruya Aerodrome complex for duty as a demolition guard. Due to a shortage of personnel some of the VDC members took over the duties of Post T.9 of the volunteer Air Observer Corps Network. The VDC was disbanded in August 1945.

From 1942 to 1944, the 14th Battalion of the VDC manned a shelter at a place which is known as Pooh Bear Corner on the Clyde Mountain. In 1942 a hole was dug into the hillside about five metres deep by two Department of Main Roads men, Tom Frances and Owen Burke. A tunnel was dug under the King’s Highway at this location and explosives which could be triggered from this shelter were placed inside. This was so that if a Japanese invading force landed at Bateman’s Bay or Moruya they could be prevented from reaching Canberra, the nation’s capital. After the War the entrance to the tunnel was sealed by concrete. Hopefully the explosives were removed and not left as a surprise for some future roadmakers! In the 1950s the Clyde Mountain Road was eventually widened and sealed. The cave was cut back to about a metre but Pooh Bear Corner is still there. It is a small hole or cave in the rock cliff face on the edge of the road. Over the entrance is printed “Sanders” because in the story of Christopher Robin, Pooh Bear lived in the forest under the name of Sanders. People, especially those with young children, would often find a convenient place to stop and leave a small gift for Pooh, preferably a pot of honey. A lot of kids would write letters to leave for Pooh Bear. In 1993 a sign was placed at the site officially naming it “Pooh Bear Corner”. Pooh Bear would be delighted to know that his contribution to the war effort has been recognised.

In November 1945 an aircraft attached to the No.5 Services Flying Training School at Uranquinty flew to Moruya via Canberra as part of a training flight in cross country navigation. It reached Moruya and was prepared and refuelled for the return journey. Loaded on board also was a special treat for the officers’ mess at Uranquinty. This treat was seven bags of fish and oysters weighing a total of 491 pounds. When all was ready the pilot, Flying Officer A.J. Fraser took off. The plane flew low over the town with excessive manoeuvring which included low level flying along the Moruya River. The heavily loaded plane, excessive manoeuvres and possibly an inherent weakness in the structure of the plane, caused the starboard Mainplane to break up in mid air just as the plane was starting to climb over Buckley’s farm on Mullenderree Flat just north of the township. It crashed into Dooga Creek, next to the farm killing all six young men. They were Flying Officer A.J. Fraser aged 22, Flying Officer W.E. Collins, 23, Flight Sergeant J. Miller 22, Leading Aircraftsman A.M. Scott 22, Leading Aircraftsman D.F. Snow 20, Leading Aircraftsman T.C. Slade 21. All are buried in Moruya cemetery.

Bomb proof concrete bunkers were constructed at the airport during the War and are still there today.

Thirty ships were sunk along the east coast during World War II by Japanese and German submarines, nineteen off the coast of NSW alone. The number would have been far higher if it were not for places like the Moruya Airport and the men and planes stationed there to aid in detection of enemy submarines.

References:

- “A Short History of Moruya Airport During World War II” by Graham Jackson and John Marsden
 Moruya Examiner 17th June 1970 and 7th April 1993
 Interview with Roy Louttit
 Article Daily Telegraph 3rd August 2017
 Loss of the Dureenbee, Broulee Bay, Folklore, Myth and Legend
 Volunteer Defence Corps in Australia During World War II
 Moruya – The First 150 Years
 “A Boy in the Bay” by Richard Gorrell
 Neil Krestensen’s article “The War Years in Bodalla” in MSHS journal, September 2012