



82nd anniversary of Newcastle's fiery reception for Japanese submarine

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Body

IT was the morning that war came right to Newcastle's doorstep.

Although it occurred decades ago, the episode became history, and today's the anniversary, exactly 82 years ago, back on June 8, 1942.

The incident, of course, was the infamous shelling of our sleeping city by a large Japanese submarine I-21 during World War II. That's when about 24 enemy shells rained down on city and harbour suburbs.

The official log at Fort Scratchley in Newcastle's East End, overlooking Nobbys beach, recorded an enemy alert raised at 2.17am with sound of gunfire to the north. Despite a false air-raid scare about an hour earlier, city streets were still ablaze with lights, although roads were deserted in the chill of early winter.

There was no siren warning that Newcastle was under attack, for real this time, and from the sea, not from aircraft. Enemy submarine star shells lit up the city and potential targets. Searchlights swept the sea mist off Nobbys looking for the maritime intruder.

Enemy shells whizzed past the East End military fort towards BHP Steelworks. Here, some exploded while others fell into the Hunter River. At that moment, 13 furnaces were in full operation and inspection holes had to be hurriedly covered up to conceal their exact position.

In Parnell Place, outside the fort, a **shell** exploded on the tramway causing metal splinters to pepper nearby terraces. Another **shell** exploded on the seawall north of the ocean baths in an enemy effort, perhaps, to silence a coastal searchlight pinpointing the 109-metre submarine lurking at sea behind Nobbys headland in a blind spot for Hunter gunners.

The gun crews of Fort Scratchley's twin 6-inch Mark VII naval guns fired back very accurately at the I-21 sub. The shots straddled the craft, which suddenly crash-dived and escaped. The fort went down in Australian military history as the only coastal fort to have fired in anger and engaged an enemy. Sydney military authorities ordered a blackout of all Newcastle lights at 2.40am, two minutes after the 23-minute enemy attack had ended.

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And, like all war stories, odd things are discovered afterwards. I've always found it ironic that one of the fort's gun crews was a Jim Cannon and that much later, in 1994, when a terrace house in Parnell Place was being reclad, the renovators discovered the old timber exterior still carried shrapnel embedded in it from 52 years before.

However, the most curious incident, to my mind, was a memory by bombardier Eric Pricter, then aged 27, who was on the crew of the gun that fired the first retaliatory shot at the Japanese sub. Speaking 40 years afterwards, the New Lambton man (pictured) hinted Newcastle was very lucky the submarine didn't risk staying around to continue its shelling of the city in 1942. As he was bringing up shells to be fired, he could hear enemy shells whining overhead. But at 2.31am, the fort's No.2 gun completely went out of action. The recoil of the gun had hit a bucket that bent the breech mechanism. It took more than an hour for the naval gun to be repaired, but luckily the enemy was long gone.

This was very fortunate as the massive 9-inch guns at Fort Wallace, at North Stockton, never fired at the offshore enemy. Only one searchlight was used to prevent the fort's position being exposed at a time when its guns could not depress low enough to fire.

One aspect of the drama later came from Stockton legend, the late Vera Deacon. Days after the shelling, her father, Norman Pender (pictured), had recovered a star shell canister with two mini-parachutes from Mosquito Island where they lived. It was probably the "great flare" that had lit up their island during the bombardment. Military officials soon confiscated the objects as the souvenirs were being shown off in a Mayfield pub. After the war, the silk parachutes were returned, and Vera's dressmaker mother created blouses for her daughters.

Another aftermath of the Japanese shelling of Newcastle city though only came in the early 1970s. That's when 'Chris', a Charlestown carpenter, revealed he had then been digging behind a house in Scott Street, Newcastle East, when his spade hit something solid. It turned out to be a small shell, probably Japanese. He rang the police.

"But you'd think I had leprosy," Chris said. " 'Cripes. Don't bring it in', the sergeant told me and hung up."

Fort Scratchley's big guns were later removed after the site closed in 1964. The guns were relocated as a static display below The Obelisk, but then returned to the fort in 1978.

Most other traces of wartime defences around Newcastle had vanished long before. Two such 'unknown' sites north of Stockton's Fort Wallace. One was the dune gun battery and the other 'Wipers' OP (observation post) which had a small radar station, the disc of which soldiers used to call "bat catchers".

Personal memories of those days are now almost gone. But the 1940s war years were a totally different era. Almost all buses, for example, terminated at The Nine Ways at Broadmeadow, not in Newcastle, to save fuel. Electric trams transported patrons into inner city suburbs. There were also hoods on the headlights of the few cars roaming the streets as a wartime safety precaution to reduce light pathways.

Another surprising fact was that from 1941 to war's end in 1945 an estimated one million US troops passed through Australia to fight in the Pacific War. Aussie soldiers, often competing with the US soldiers for the affections of local women complained, calling their rivals "overpaid, oversexed and over here".

One small reminder of that US presence in Newcastle was pointed out to me by a friend recently. On a door arch of the brick monolith of what is now the Hunter Mall Chambers in Scott Street, overlooking the Newcastle ferry terminal, is an "Australia Remembers" plaque from 1995. The plaque tells us of the forgotten history of this former Bebarfalds furniture warehouse from September 1943. The American Red Cross service club once occupied four of its five-storeys. It held 500 beds, a dance hall, dining room, picture theatre, barber shop, and games rooms.

It was for the use of US and Australian servicemen training in the Lower Hunter and Port Stephens.

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