
Alan Wellsley Griffin

Hot Bath & Joy Ride in Hudson Bomber

HOT BATH & JOY RIDE IN HUDSON BOMBER

Between the township and the sand hills on the beach near Sheba Lane, was a large round tank sunk into the ground. This is where the bore water that supplied the houses emerged from deep in the ground. The water was so hot that you had to lower yourself in very slowly and many a hot bath was had there.

Early in 1943 a Hudson Bomber had engine trouble and a new piston was fitted to one of the engines. When the job was completed, Hugh and I happened to be off duty at the time. We were asked if we would like a ride in the plane when they took it for a test run – the answer was “yes” and off we went heading north along the coast. A couple of hundred miles went by when our luck ran out and one engine ceased. We had to limp back to Broome on one good engine – what happened to the plane I don't know, but after that experience I wasn't looking for another joy ride!

Occasionally the army operated the old Open Air Sun Theatre. The seating was in deck chairs, and the projection equipment was antiquated and often would not work. They would on such occasions announce “There will be no show tonight”, to which (even though it was free) there would be a loud groan go up from the crowd. It was always something to look forward to. Some time later when the RAAF unit was much larger, we had our own pictures operating on a vacant block of land in the town.

One night coming back from the pictures I was stung on the right foot (big toe) by a scorpion. I got a razor blade, cut a cross on the sting and squeezed out the poison. My tent mates insisted that I be medically checked and I was taken to hospital where I spent the night under observation. None the worse for wear, although I did develop a large ulcer about the size of a fifty cent piece on the right foot which took quite a while to clear up.

After a month or so in Broome, Wing Commander Rose who was CO of RAAF signals in WA arrived. He instructed Hugh Whitford and me to move into a house on the edge of town with seven army men who were taking part in a “Hush Hush” operation. The operation and the reason why Hugh and I were sent to the army unit I will explain later in the section entitled “The Situation and the Poker Game”. We were isolated from the airstrip and had no connection with the RAAF personnel we were previously living with.

Staff SGT Joe Ellis was in charge, Alf Dellow from Williamstown was the cook (if you can call him that), and there were four Karna operators and an electrician. One of the army Karna operators, Col Murray from Footscray, was forever saying he would like to be home having a cantaloupe and ice cream at "Russell Collins" (A select restaurant in Collins St. Melbourne) - it certainly made your mouth water at the mere thought of it.

No paperwork existed regarding our move from the RAAF unit to the army "Hush Hush" unit, and in the ensuing months the RAAF expanded and was operating 40 ZFC (Zone Filter Centre) and apparently Hugh and I were still listed on their WT strength.

With two WT's less they were having difficulty manning the watches until someone realised that Hugh and I were the two operators missing.

It was some high ranking officer who appeared at the army unit house and ordered us to pack our gear and report to the Zone Filter Centre. My reply to this order was: "Sure we will do that, but you should know that we have been stuck here and forgotten for twelve months without leave". Result - we were sent on leave in a few days and after leave returned to 40 ZFC Broome.

To go on leave we were able to get a ride on a DC3 which was travelling north to Batchelor near Darwin - south to Alice Springs overnight, then onto Adelaide. The plane was loaded with frozen meat and we were the only ones travelling with the cargo. Between Batchelor and Alice Springs we ran into a violent electrical storm which tossed the plane around violently. Hugh was airsick and was only able to lie down on the frozen meat - I have often wondered where that contaminated meat ended up.



Alan Griffin (myself)
at the controls of an
AR7 receiver inside
the Army "Hush
Hush" Unit - Broome

Hugh Whitford and I
worked closely together
for many months until
different postings forced
us to go our separate
ways. We did not meet
up again until after the
war despite Hugh
transiting through
Morotai en route to
another posting in the
Pacific.



The Boys at the Army
"Hush Hush" Unit :
SGT Joe Ellis CTR
front, Alf Dellow RH
rear, Hugh Whitford
FRT left.

WHAT ARE THE PROBABILITIES?

After the big air raid in Broome on 3rd March 1942, many allied aircraft were destroyed. A total of fifteen flying boats (Dutch, American, British and Australian origin) and seven land-based aircraft were demolished by attacking Japanese Zeros. The wreckage of the two flying boats closest to shore could only be accessed on foot at the low point of a "King Tide", and only then with great difficulty because of the rushing out-pour of a nearby tidal creek.

I arrived in Broome quite some time after the air raid in May 1943. One of my first visions was not only the remains of the flying boats in Roebuck Bay, but more significantly, a wooden cross made from an old packing case on the beach above the high water line near the Roebuck Bay Hotel. Written on the cross were the words "Unknown Dutchman Buried here".

A few days after establishing myself in my new quarters, I decided to investigate the flying boat wrecks. It was a decent trek to reach the two closest aircraft and once there, time was limited because there was only twenty minutes before the tide started to turn come back in again – the speed with which it turned and the rate of change in the water's depth has to be seen to be believed. While the tide played its changing role, I was able to find a Vary Pistol (Flare Gun), a case containing clothing to fit a large male, a thermos flask containing a rice meal and wrapped in underclothing, personal papers that were written in Dutch.

I dried these papers and carefully stored them. Some time later Army Intelligence called at our house in Broome and asked if anybody had salvaged anything from the wreck. Being a good boy, I immediately handed over the personal papers. Interestingly, the papers indicated that the man's name was "Van Der Werf" and his address was Surabaya, Java, Indonesia.

As no male by the name of "Van Der Werf" appears in any records relating to this air raid (including any Western Australian War Cemetery) and the wooden packing case cross on the beach bears a testimony to an unknown Dutchman – by the law of probabilities and the circumstances it is most possible that the unknown Dutchman buried on the beach was "Van Der Werf".

I have since donated the photograph of the cross [page 28] and the Vary Pistol [page 29] to the Broome Historical society.

What Are The Probabilities?



Defending Broome with
twin .5 calibre machine
guns

The Wreckage of the
Flying Boat from which I
recovered the case of
the Dutchman called
"Van Der Werf".

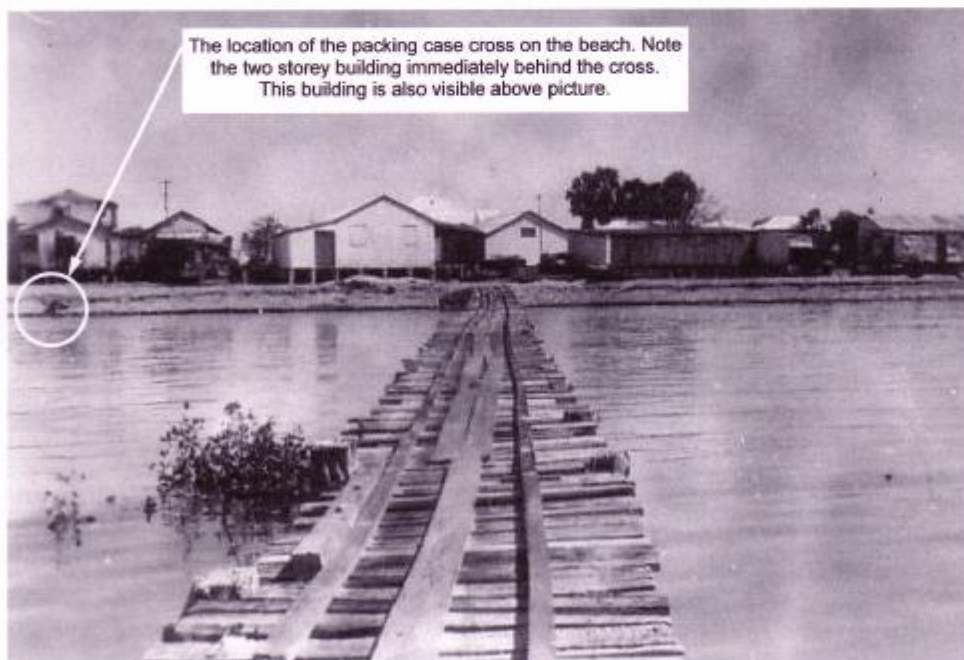


Front view of the
crashed Flying Boat
showing the remains
of the port engine and
rear wing section

What Are The Probabilities?



The cross made from the wooden planks of a packing case on the beach at Roebuck Bay - Broome. It pays tribute to an unknown Dutchman buried in 1942



The location of the packing case cross on the beach. Note the two storey building immediately behind the cross. This building is also visible above picture.

Streeter and Male's Jetty - Broome 1943



Enlarged view of the packing case cross, clearly showing the testament for the
"Unknown Dutchman" at Roebuck Bay Beach - Broome

The testimony reads:

" R.I.P. AN UNKNOWN DUTCHMAN BURIED HERE MARCH 4TH, 1942 "



The Vary Pistol (Flare Gun) I recovered from the Flying Boat wreck in 1943. This was handed on to the Broome Historical Society when I returned to Broome in 1984



Taking "time out" at the front of the Army "Hush Hush" unit. Newspapers were a rarity, and having been sent via mail by family and friends were often several weeks old.

RETURN TO BROOME

In September 1984 my wife Phyl and I returned to Broome on a trip of nostalgia forty years on. The house the army "Hush Hush" unit, Hugh and I operated from was exactly the same, except for the slit trench being filled in. I knocked on the door, stated my interest in the house and was willingly shown over the premises by the lady of the house; it was almost as if time had stood still.

I had often wondered about the wrecks of the flying boats in the bay and my enquiries indicated that they still existed. The only time I could get out to the wrecks whilst we were in Broome was at the lowest possible tide; about 5pm one evening, which was very dicey because dusk and darkness followed at a fast rate. I was determined to give it a go and set off alone through the mangroves following the tide out. I crossed the tidal creek which was not as difficult as it used to be because of work along the shore which cut off a large area of the mangrove swamp. The thongs I wore proved to be in hindrance and I found it easier to go bare foot and carry the thongs and camera.

On reaching the wreck upon which I found the case of the Dutchman "Van Der Werf", I placed my thongs on the plane's fuselage above the waterline and proceeded to take photos. As you can see by the bottom photographs on page 33, the tide did not go out far enough to leave the wrecks completely exposed and it had already turned and was on its way in. Keeping in mind the fall in the tide is between 28 to 30ft, and it was really starting to "move".

Return to Broome



The Communications Room inside the Army "Hush Hush" unit in Broome

Alan Griffin (myself) digging the initial stages of the Slit Trench at the rear of the Army "Hush Hush" unit. These trenches were typically 5 to 6 foot deep, 3 foot wide and offered protection during enemy bombing.



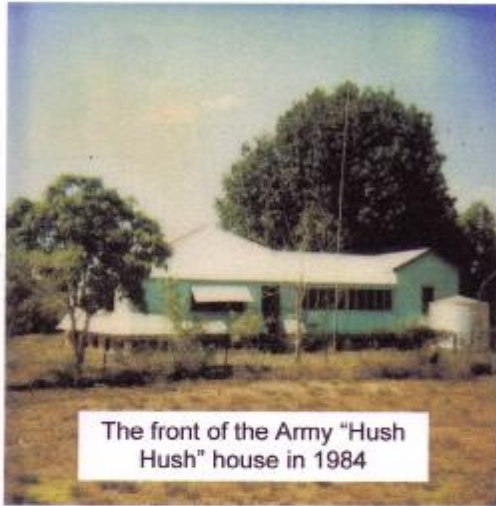
Two buddies at the Army "Hush Hush" Unit continuing with Slit Trench digging

Time was short and as you can see the sun had just about set when I headed back to the shore. Part of the way back I remembered I had left my thongs behind but with the tide incoming and the darkness approaching there was no turning back.

By the time I was half way back to shore, darkness enveloped the complete coastline and I could not see where I had come through the mangroves. I headed to the left a little knowing I would come to the shore line near the old pier which was quite a distance from the continental hotel where we were staying - a trek which I had to negotiate in bare feet on a rough surface road.

Phyl had been worried when darkness fell (and to tell the truth, so was I) and she had gone down to the beach to look for me to no avail. When I turned up you could see the relief on her face. It was forty-one years since I had retrieved the case from the wreck and I was amazed that there was still structure there after the ravages of time, tide and souvenir hunters.

Return to Broome

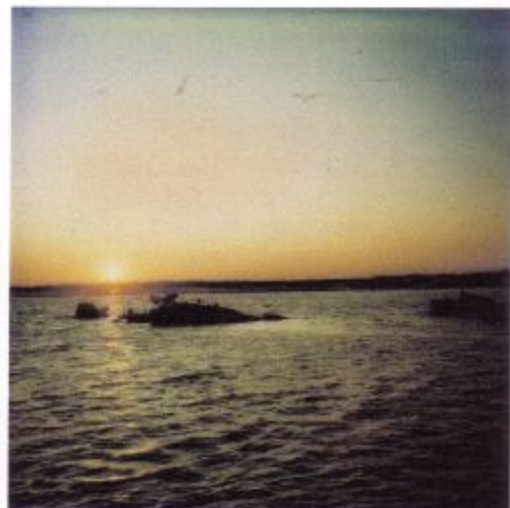


The front of the Army "Hush Hush" house in 1984



Top Right: Rear view of the "Hush Hush" unit as it was when I returned to Broome in 1984

Right: Rear view of the "Hush Hush" unit as it was when we commenced slit trench digging in 1943. Nothing much had changed in 41 years. It was as if time had stood still



Flying Boat wrecks still visible at low tide (Roebuck Bay) when I returned to Broome in 1984

THE SITUATION & THE POKER GAME

Hugh Whitford and I (both RAAF WT operators) arrived in Broome aboard the M.V Koolinda from Fremantle WA, 12 May 1943.

After the first air raid on Broome 3rd March 1942 when fifteen flying boats sitting in the bay & seven other aircraft on the airstrip, were destroyed by the 'Japs', and a subsequent two air raids in March & August, the town was evacuated – it was a real ghost town.

As I have previously mentioned, what we arrived at was a RAAF unit of ten men and an army detachment of thirty. Our duties consisted of forwarding weather reports and reporting the daily appearance overhead of a 'Jap' reconnaissance plane (unopposed) to Perth HQ. After a couple of months the CO of communications for Western Area arrived in Broome and sent Hugh and I to a house in the town where an army unit of seven men were operating a "Hush Hush" operation. These men could receive and record 'Jap Karna' code and with their equipment and plot the movement of 'Jap' aircraft in the area of Koepang & Java. They were unable to send Morse code so Hugh and I were to provide communications for them back to their HQ in Darwin.

As mentioned earlier, the unit was commanded by Staff SGT Joe Ellis who must have had the power to see the future. On the 1st August he said we should dig a slit trench in the back yard – which we did. His decision was based on the following facts:

1) There was an increase in Japanese aircraft activity in the Koepang Java area as observed by the messages he was forwarding through Hugh and I back to his HQ in Darwin. (Transmissions were in code).

2) The weather was perfect and it was a full moon on the 16th August and there had been 'Jap' reconnaissance planes overhead for several days previously.

We were lounging around the house and sure enough mid evening, when the moon was high and bright as day, the drone of a 'Jap' plane was heard. There was panic as we all moved like lightning, cutting the house lights and dashing for the slit trench.

The Situation & The Poker Game

As the story goes, there was a big poker game in progress at the Roebuck Bay Hotel and every player thought he had the winning hand.

The betting was big when the drone of the 'Jap' plane was heard and all the lights in the hotel were turned off – every one dived for cover as the bombs began to fall, starting close to the hotel. When the raid had finished all the betting money on the table had disappeared and nobody to this day knows who took it. I can only say for sure that it wasn't me because I have an alibi – I was crouched in a slit trench several hundred yards away with seven other army guys and Hugh Whitford. I could swear that the whistle of every bomb that was dropped sounded like it was coming straight for me!

BEAGLE BAY MISSION

On returning to Broome after leave, we moved into a house in the township which was named "Wuthering Heights" and I covered the wall behind my bed with pin-up girls cut from magazines.

One particular day there was a truck load of equipment to go to Cape Leveque Radar Station. The truck was to go to north from Broome to Beagle Bay Mission (about the half way mark), meet another truck from 'Cape Leveque' and transfer the load. Two volunteers were called for to go and help with the loading and unloading and Jack Schurmer and I volunteered, and off we went.

We had heard of 'Beagle Bay Mission' and its famous mother of pearl shell altar and when we arrived there, we weren't disappointed. The workmanship and design of the pearl shell used in the altar was something to behold and we were able to take good photos of this outstanding piece of work.

I was able to retrace our steps in 1986 when Phyl (my wife) and I went back to Broome. We left Broome by 4WD and travelled to 'Beagle Bay Mission', meeting Father Francis again and on showing him some of the photos I took in 1943, he said (refer top photograph on page 41), "there I am as a young man". He insisted we stay for lunch and talk of old times.

The Beagle Bay Mission was self supporting in the 1940's but when the area was handed onto the Aboriginal people, the church buildings were physically roped off from the rest of the land and cultivated area's such as the orange groves were left to go to rack and ruin.

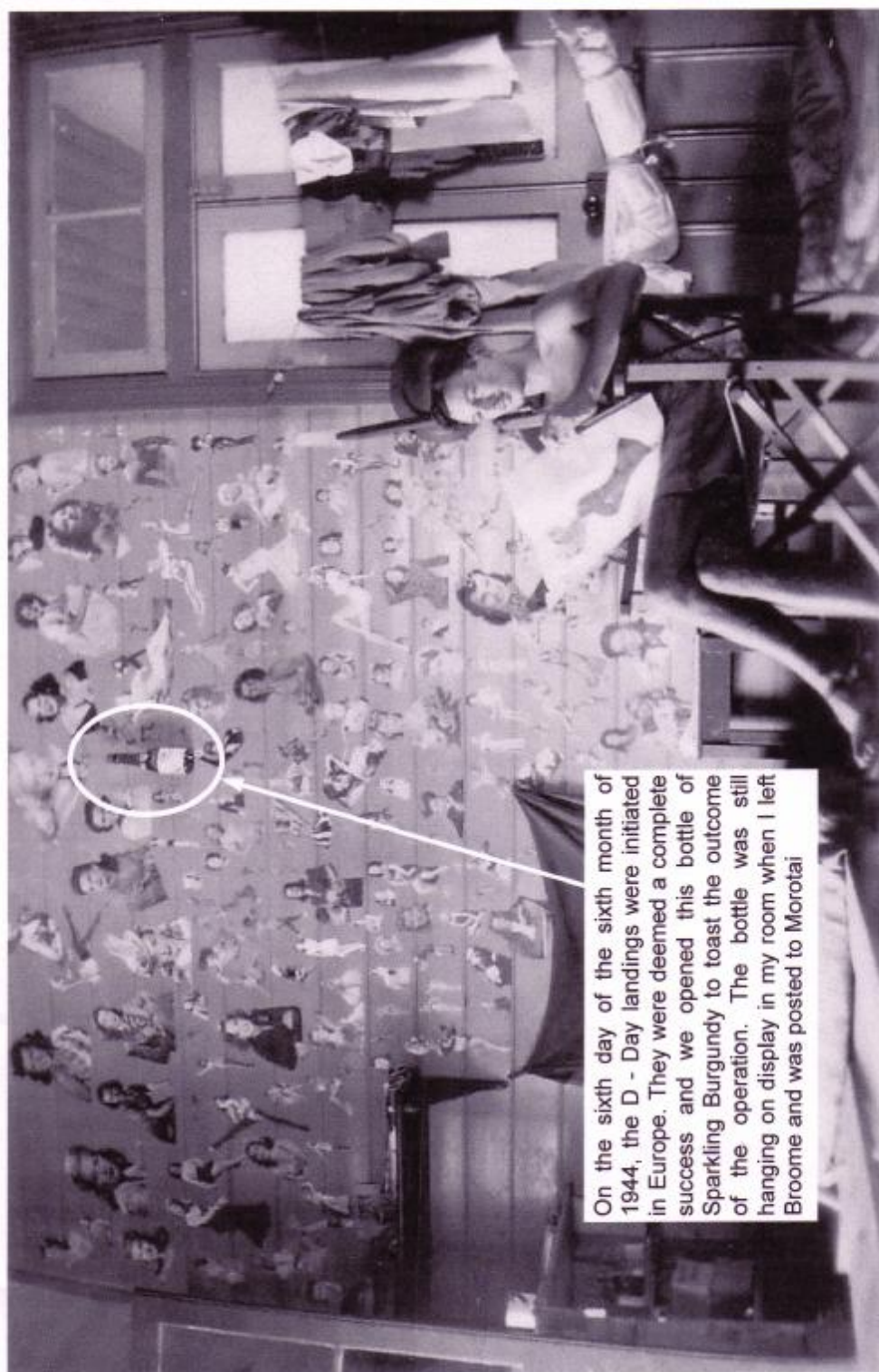


"Wuthering Heights" - One of the houses we occupied in Broome. Although illegible, the name plaque of the house is visible on the left hand side of the trellis, above the staircase. My room was behind this trellis

During my stay at "Wuthering Heights" I amassed a collection of Pin-Up girls. Here I proudly display them together with two rifles and a "Tin Hat"



Inside my room at "Wuthering Heights" showing my bed and more of my Pin-Up Girl collection

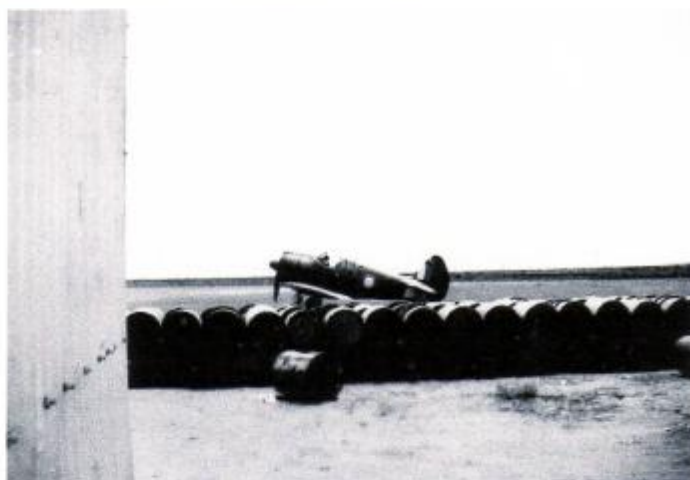


On the sixth day of the sixth month of 1944, the D - Day landings were initiated in Europe. They were deemed a complete success and we opened this bottle of Sparkling Burgundy to toast the outcome of the operation. The bottle was still hanging on display in my room when I left Broome and was posted to Morotai



Inside the 40ZFC (Zone Filter Centre) Wireless Telegraph Communications Room showing a dayshift on duty using five AR7 receivers

A Boomerang Fighter taxiing at Broome Airstrip. They were Australia's first single seat fighter. A total of 250 were produced. They were made of wood and metal and were eventually replaced by superior Spitfires and Kittyhawks.



A refueling stop at Port Hedland Western Australia while returning home from leave

Beagle Bay Mission



The dirt road from Broome to Beagle Bay



Looking from the rear of a troop carrier truck back towards Broome



The Church at Beagle Bay Mission WA



The Magnificent Pearl Shell Altar inside the church in 1943

Beagle Bay Mission



L to R:
Father Francis, Jack
Schurmer and Alan
Griffin (myself) with
Aboriginal children at
Beagle Bay Mission in
1943

An Aboriginal Elder
with children at the
Mission

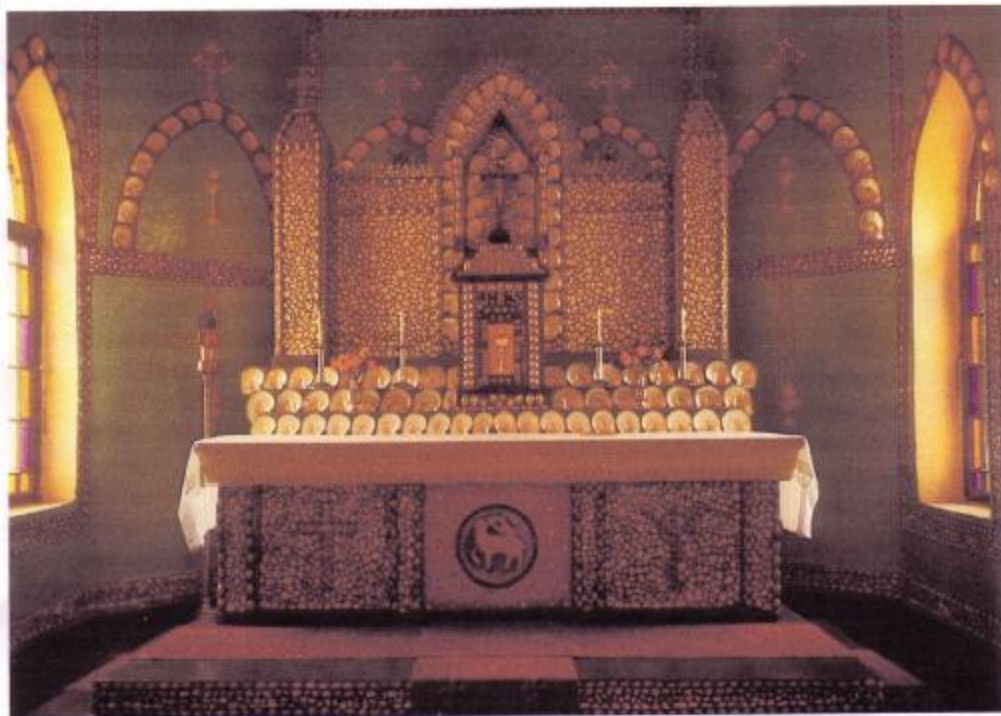


Because of the
relative isolation of
the Mission, visitors
created a memorable
event for those who
lived there. The
children were
particularly intrigued
with our RAAF service
issue "Slouch" hats

Beagle Bay Mission



Father Francis and Alan Griffin (myself) at Beagle Bay mission
when I returned forty-one years later in 1984



The stunning Pearl Shell Altar at the Mission in more recent times (Circa 1984)

THE FISH TRAP

Several of my mates and I built a fish trap to give us a change to our diet of bully beef and other tinned delights. The drop in the tide was 28 – 30 ft and when the tide was out there was no water in Roebuck Bay. All you could see was a thin blue line on the horizon. We thought it would be a good idea to use this huge fall in tide to assist us in catching fish. So we set about making a simple trap that used the rise and fall of the tide.

The fish trap was made from rabbit proof fence wire, strung between star pickets. In essence it was a funnel arrangement, where the opening or mouth of the funnel was about 75 yards wide, with each side being inclined about 45 degrees to the centreline. The funnel opening faced the beach, and the tip into the deeper ocean water.

It was about 100 yards from the mouth of the funnel to the tip. The tip of the funnel also passed into a circular holding pen approximately 10 foot in diameter, again using rabbit proof fencing suspended with star pickets. A separate dividing fence was installed down the centreline of the funnel, running from the mouth of the funnel and stopping just short of the tip. This was also made from rabbit proof wire and acted as a barrier to fish swimming parallel to the beach when the tide was retreating.

The theory was that the dividing fence would help direct fish down the funnel and into the holding pen – once the fish encountered the dividing fence while swimming parallel to the beach, they would track along it and down into the holding pen in search of deeper water.

In reality, it worked like a charm. The fish were indeed forced to swim down the funnel and into the pen as the tide ran out.

On many occasions we had sufficient fish in the trap to supply all the units in the area – I remember one catch of ninety or so "Sweep" (Sea Sweep – Genus Scorpis) and on another occasion the cook was presented a large shark about 10 ft long. When I arrived back at base the shark was balanced on a long bench seat in front of the mess where he proceeded to carve it into fillets – no trouble to him for in civilian life he was the owner/manager of a fish and chip shop.

By 1944 civilians had started to return to the township of Broome. Dr Oldmeadow who was Superintendent of the hospital was also an officer in the army and Chief Magistrate (I doubt if there were any other magistrates in the area). The town in my opinion operated around Dr Oldmeadow.

Jack Laphorne who was a fellow WT at 40 ZFC talked me into being part of a quartet to put on a couple of items at a concert put together by a group of the boys. We practiced quite a few times at Dr Oldmeadow's home and on few occasions Mrs Oldmeadow invited us to dinner with a sing along around the piano afterwards.

One of the families that returned to Broome had a house on the outskirts of the town. I believe they were of Malay origin and had lots of chickens running free in the scrub. At the time we were putting in a power line from the ops room to the transmitters in the scrub. The operation consisted of one truck and driver and three men. We sank the steel poles in the ground as we gradually moved towards the transmitter's location. One evening just as we were about to knock off, the chickens threw caution to the wind and came close to the truck. It has been well documented and cited that "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush" and in a flash I swooped and gathered one up in my bare hands. We drove off and I had it plucked before we got back to camp!

The truck driver was friendly with the township's civilian train driver and he and his wife invited us to dinner using our plump chicken as the main course. Regrettably I cannot recall their names, but it was a nice gesture and an even nicer dinner.