

## BERKELEY PREPARES FOR WAR

When she was researching the history of Berkeley, Society member, Kathleen Barwick, (now Kathleen Hooke) received the following information from the Australian Army:

I refer to your letter of 7th April, 1963, in which you requested information in regard to the concrete blocks in Lake Illawarra and tank trap in the Berkeley Area.

It is regretted that Army files containing the correspondence dealing with the concrete blocks and the tank traps have been destroyed, and as such, no specific information can be obtained for you.

In reply to your questions, concerning the defence of Berkeley, I will answer each question separately.

*Why was the tank trap necessary?*

It was designed to stop an armoured thrust along the coast from Port Kembla.

*Were there extensive precautions taken to stop the Japanese entering here (Berkeley)?*

After the capture of Singapore, plans were prepared for the defence of Eastern Australian Coastline with special attention to possible landing areas near major cities and large industrial centres. Wollongong - Port Kembla was one of these areas to be defended.

*Was the Japanese navy expected to force a landing near Port Kembla?*

It is generally not known where an enemy would strike on such an extensive coastline but Wollongong - Port Kembla is an industrial centre and as such was regarded as possible target for enemy assault.

*Were there other tank traps established along the Eastern coast of Australia?*

The Eastern Coast has many coastal rivers which would have been possible defensive barriers for tanks, but all major centres of population had plans for the construction of tank traps and many were actually built.

*Were there any other means used to fortify Berkeley or parts of Lake Illawarra?*

These two places would have been in the overall plan for the defence of the Illawarra Area, and as such would have been defended had enemy landed by the troops stationed in that area and the aircraft from nearby airfields.

I hope that these details may be of use to your in your lecture.

*Yours faithfully*

(Signed) G A Osborne, Major (for the Colonel)

General Staff, Eastern Command

Australian Military Forces

Victoria Barracks

Paddington NSW

In her book, Berkeley and Surrounding Districts, Kathleen used information she received from the Army and from another member of the Society, Bert Weston. A former Army Officer, Bert related to Kathleen the following story:

“It was known that if the Japanese had landed on the South Coast, to advance with tanks towards Port Kembla, an attempt to thwart this movement would have been necessary. When Japanese were initially supreme in the Pacific it was considered that the Wollongong - Port Kembla industrial complex would be a prime target and defensive measures were set out.

Fort Drummond, armed with two 9.2 inch guns, was built near Wollongong, to command the seaward approaches to Port Kembla and anti-aircraft batteries ringed the heavy industries. In addition the Main Roads Department was given the job of building three strategic roads to serve the coast, these being Mt Keira to Wilton, Mt Ousley to the top of Bulli Pass and Heathcote to Liverpool. The cliffs at the zig-zag at the top of Macquarie Pass were drilled for explosive charges designed to block the road with fallen rocks; the bored holes are still in evidence at the lower elbow.

To block the advance of enemy tanks and wheeled vehicles in the event of a landing south of the Lake, an anti-tank ditch was dug from Brownsville to the west shore of the Lake then continued across the shallows in the form of a double row of driven piles and finally as a twin row of pyramidal tetrahedra weighing three tons each which extended out towards Hooka Island until the final half dozen involved stood in six feet of water.

Another six hundred were similarly placed in Griffin's Bay on the eastern shore and continued through Kemblawarra with a water filled ditch out to the ocean sand dunes.

North of Wollongong another ditch was dug across the coastal plain from the foothills to the sea, passing between Corrimal and Bellambi. In all, the Main Roads Board spent ten million dollars on these measures which, with wages at less than ten dollars per week, covered a mighty programme.

Some of the work stemmed from the panicky and often woolly thinking engendered by fear of invasion and was also instanced in Queensland where, from troop trains going north, we saw that name boards had been removed from railway stations in order to confuse the Japanese but in many cases the name of the township remained painted on the roof of a nearby hotel or store.

With the defeat of the Japanese and the end of the war in 1945 these defensive measures had never been put to the test. Guns and searchlights were dismantled and taken away from the anti-aircraft battery sites but the tank traps remained with the rows of wooden piles and concrete tetrahedra intruding into the land for a quarter of a mile on the east and west shores.

Following repeated requests from the Berkeley fishermen that the obstructions be removed and their fishing grounds restored to normal status and after a lapse of seven years the Commonwealth Department of Works called tenders (in 1952) for the removal of the piles and tetrahedra, the latter to be shifted to Berkeley and so placed as to form a breakwater and a small boat harbour.

Here I came into the picture. When demobilised at the end of the Pacific war and after

fourteen years pre-war in New Guinea I found it almost impossible to buy or build a house in NSW, wartime controls and restrictions still operated on all building materials.

As my army engineer unit in New Guinea had built over a score of large wooden lighters at Port Moresby for cargo working, I decided to apply my know-how to a long held ambition to build a house boat. I applied to the authorities for a permit to buy the necessary materials to build a floating home and accordingly a permit was issued.

Suffice to say the hull was built and launched at Windang and a commodious three bedroom residence thereon fitted with every convenience and electric light plant. Moored in the channel at the entrance to Lake Illawarra, it was my home for some years.

The time eventually came when life afloat was no longer convenient. I wanted to live on dry land and my chance came when tenders were called for the removal of the obstruction.

My quote was accepted and with the help of my brother, Rupert, then and still a resident of Dapto, the superstructure was removed from the houseboat and the hull then converted to a hoisting and transporting role by fitting a mast and swinging derrick equipped with a power winch. A powerful towing launch was bought to complete the rig.

Work commenced under adverse conditions, a winter of unusually strong westerly winds, the upshot being that the wooden hull took such a battering against the concrete blocks that it opened up and sank. Declared a total loss by Lloyd's agents, insurance was paid and a replacement steel hull was built by a Port Kembla firm in two longitudinal halves which was launched in the Lake, bolted together, and equipped with lifting gear as before.

Suffice to say the twelve hundred tetrahedra were lifted, transported to Berkeley and placed to form the breakwater and resultant sheltered anchorage that exists today.

The steel hull was subsequently converted to a suction dredge and used to cut an intake

channel for the cooling water at Tallawarra power station.

Finally, it was hired to Thirlwell and McKenzie and taken to Port Kembla where it was used in demolishing a small jetty and was then left at anchor. The hatches were, by some oversight, left open and in choppy seas came overboard one night and barge No 2 sank in the mooring area used by iron ore ships. Requested to remove it as a matter of urgency a diver attached a hawser to one of the bollards and tractor dragged it ashore, tearing out the bottom in so doing.

This story ends with my receipt of a cheque from the hirer in compensation and the reduction of the mangled remains into scrap for the steelworks."

Kathleen Hooke with appreciation to Bert Weston

Copies of Berkeley and Surrounding Districts cost **\$40** (plus \$5 postage) and are on sale at the Museum, from Kathleen Hook - 4 Roylston St, Paddington 2021 (**02 331 4870**) or from Alan Washbourne - 46 Cumberland St, Berkeley 2506 (**042 71 1996**)