

Extracts from.... **THE VMARS NEWS SHEET**

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The VMARS News Sheet Issue

Australia's Coastwatchers

Last year, VMARS Member Ray Robinson VK2NO wrote about the centenary of the Amalgamated Wireless Australasia AWA Company. Ray's interesting article reminded me that AWA was the manufacturer that produced equipment used by the wireless reporting stations run by the Royal Australian Navy to monitor and report Japanese military movements in the Pacific Islands during WWII. The story of the Australian Coastwatchers has always fascinated me since I first became aware of their existence after seeing the film "Father Goose" in the 1960s, in which Cary Grant played the part of a whisky swilling and reluctant Coastwatcher stranded on a remote Pacific Island, with Trevor Howard playing his Royal Australian Navy wireless contact in Port Moresby, New Guinea.

Island, to the east of New Guinea, and into the chain of about one thousand Solomon Islands, a decision that proved crucial during the later battles fought by US forces to dislodge Japanese occupying troops. Aware that the name 'Coastwatcher' was a clear indication of the organisation's primary purpose, one of Feldt's earliest decisions was to have the name removed from official documents and for the organisation to be known henceforth only by the codename 'Ferdinand'. Ferdinand was a popular children's character noted for sitting quietly under trees and smelling the flowers, which Feldt thought was an appropriate simile for the activities his Coastwatchers would undertake.

A wireless telegraphist operator, probably Sergeant (Sgt) William 'Billy' Bennett, MM, British Solomon Islands Protectorate Defence Force (BSIPDF),



operating an AWA 3BZ Teleradio at the Seghe coastwatchers' station ZFJ5. The station was commanded by Captain DG Kennedy, BSIPDF. Sgt Bennett, a Solomon Islander born in the New Georgia area, trained as a wireless operator in Fiji and, following the war, joined the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Service as an announcer and producer. After retirement, he was appointed Chairman of the Board of the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation

A radio reporting organisation was originally set up by the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board following the First World War after being persuaded by Captain JG Clare, of the Royal Australian Navy, that the islands to the North and Northeast of Australia were potential centres of insurrection. The islands were important to the Australian economy, being home to many cattle stations, plantations and mining resources but, by the 1930s, they were among the territories that were of interest to the Japanese nationalist 'Nanshinron' or 'Southern Expansion Doctrine', which was being promoted by the Imperial Japanese Navy at the time. To begin with, Coastwatchers were recruited from cattle-station managers, planters, mine managers and missionaries who had strong local connections and knowledge but, by 1935, the growing threat from expansionist Japan led to a large scale revision and enlargement of the Coastwatch organisation by the Australian Director of Naval Intelligence, Commander RB Long. Long appointed a retired naval officer, Lieutenant Commander Eric Feldt, to undertake the reorganisation and transform it into a significant source of military intelligence. New Australian Coastwatch wireless stations were established on New Britain

The supply, installation of and maintenance contract for equipment for the newly enlarged 'Ferdinand' intelligence gathering organisation was given to the part-nationalised AWA Company, which developed a new portable wireless station, designated the Teleradio1, for the project. The wireless station consisted of a separate transmitter and

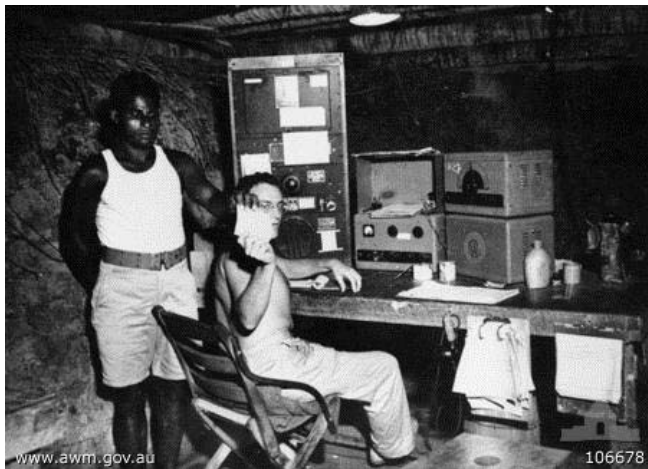
Teleradio 3BZ transmitter



receiver unit powered by batteries or by a pedal driven generator mounted on a bicycle frame. A petrol generator derived from a motor car engine was also made available and additional operators and technicians, who were AWA employees, were appointed. By 1940, the Teleradio station had been further developed to become the model 3A, still in separate boxes but now with a crystal controlled transmitter having both CW and AM capability using class B modulation and an 807 in the PA. With remarkable foresight, the AWA designers made further significant design changes to include a general coverage 200 kc/s to 30 Mc/s receiver with a Muirhead slow motion tuning drive and provision for a crystal channel. The transmitter was little changed from the earlier version but power could now be supplied from 40–60 c/s AC at 105–130 V or 200–260 V. It could also be operated from DC at the same voltages. A further option was to run on batteries which supplied HT from a vibrator in the separate power supply unit, which additionally housed a loudspeaker. Protective removable front covers were secured with sprung latches providing protection during transportation. The AWA Teleradio 3BZ, introduced in 1942, had a redesigned transmitter and more crystal channels available. These improvements made the Teleradio ideal for withstanding transportation over difficult terrain and for operating on fixed frequencies from unreliable power sources in the field. In the 1940s and, due to the bulk and weight of the wireless equipment and its ancillaries, the term portable, when applied to radio stations in the South Pacific, frequently meant transportation by several local porters or pack mules because of the inaccessible operational locations that had to

be used. Most 'Ferdinand' Coastwatcher stations were allocated frequencies in the 6 Mc/s band which was always referred to as 'X Frequency' and operators also had spare crystals for use on secondary frequencies if required for operational reasons.

Around 600 wireless operators worked in 'Ferdinand', many located on isolated islands occupied by the Japanese from early in 1942. They were largely recruited from Australian and New Zealand nationals, some of whom were licenced radio amateurs, but some local islanders also took on the role and were later joined by US Marine and US Army operators. These men, and one woman, were, in effect, running independent local intelligence gathering organisations in enemy occupied territory and with agents recruited from the local population. Their role was to observe and report on enemy ship and aircraft movements and on the location and build-up of Japanese military assets. Most Australians working in the islands were evacuated before the Japanese occupation, but a few stayed behind as Coastwatchers and, where possible, were supplied from Australia by air drops or by sea. This became increasingly difficult as the Japanese strengthened their military domination of the region, requiring many Coastwatchers to rely on foraging and support from the islanders. One Australian planter who had stayed behind was captured, tortured and executed soon after the Japanese arrival, prompting Lieutenant Commander Eric Feldt to arrange that civilian operatives working under his command would be appointed to the RANVR, assigned military ranks and supplied with uniforms in an effort to provide them with some protection if they were captured. This helped a little, but most Japanese occupiers regarded captured Coastwatchers as spies, which resulted in an official death toll of thirty eight. The Japanese were fully aware of the presence of Coastwatchers in the islands and they made extensive resources available to seek them out and disrupt their operations. For local civilians who had provided the Coastwatchers with support, capture by the Japanese meant almost certain summary execution.



Lunga, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. 1943-10. The base radio station dugout of the Coastwatchers Ken network in the Solomon Islands. The equipment operated by this station is (left in rack) an HRO RAS Army type transmitter/receiver and (right) an AWA 3BZ Teleradio for emergency use

To start with, radio messages were sent in Morse code using an early encryption method called 'Playfair', which had been developed by Charles Wheatstone in 1854. It encoded two letter groups, which made it more secure than single letter substitution, and had been used extensively by the British in the Boer War and in WWI because it required no special decryption equipment and was reasonably fast. It was later replaced with a code specially developed by 'Ferdinand' cryptographers and called 'Bull'. When Japanese forces were observed massing for attacks, it was not uncommon for 'Ferdinand' messages to be sent in plain language in order to save precious time and provide the defenders with the maximum time to prepare and counter-attack.



Coastwatchers moving their radio equipment through the kunai grass. This group had just landed near Oro Bay on the PNG mainland (AWM 127577)



A coast-watching radio at work in the jungle. This one, near Dobadura on the Papua New Guinean mainland, north of the Kokoda Track, shows how many parts there are to the machine and how difficult it would have been to transport it. (AWM 015364)

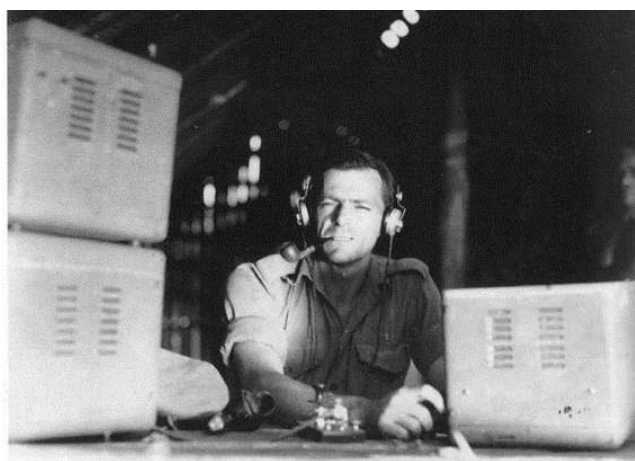
Another role of the Coastwatchers was to locate and arrange the recovery of downed allied and enemy airmen and shipwrecked sailors. 'Ferdinand' was instrumental in the rescue of 26 year-old Lieutenant, Junior Grade, later President John F Kennedy when PT-109, the Patrol Torpedo PT Boat that he was commanding, was rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer. The resulting explosion was seen by Coastwatcher RAN Sub-Lieutenant Arthur Evans from his concealed observation post on Mount Veve volcano on Kolombangara Island. Evans received a coded message about the missing PT boat and, believing it likely that he had witnessed its destruction, he dispatched two islanders in a dugout canoe to a nearby island where they found that Kennedy and ten crew members had survived. Kennedy famously scratched details on a coconut shell which the Islanders took to Rendova, an allied military base 40 miles away, and the crew were eventually picked up by another PT boat.

One famous 'Ferdinand' Coastwatcher, who was located on the northern tip of the Japanese-occupied Solomon Island of Bougainville, was Jack Read. Bougainville contained large concentrations of Japanese Naval and Airforce units and, with a second Coastwatcher Paul Mason, situated on the southern end of the island, regularly sent urgent signals to the US Navy, initially *via* Port Moresby but, as the situation developed, direct to US Navy ships in plain language, giving advanced warning of approaching attacks on Guadalcanal. In

peace-time Read had been an Assistant District Officer on the island and Mason a plantation manager, so they knew the island and the local population well. Their concealed observation posts overlooked assembly areas for Japanese Navy battle groups and departure routes for Japanese Air Force attack squadrons heading South for Guadalcanal, about 350 miles away. The real-time intelligence signals provided the US defenders with sufficient time to make good preparations of their defences and to make effective counter-attacks. On one occasion, Read reported 40 enemy bombers leaving Bougainville to attack Guadalcanal, with only 18 bombers returning. Both men reported the build-up and passage of a large Japanese fleet of 61 ships, including 10 troop transporters, tankers and warships moving south and clearly intended to retake Guadalcanal. Due to the intelligence received from Read and Mason, the Japanese operation was a failure. This intelligence was credited by General Patch, US Commanding General at Guadalcanal in a signal he sent to 'Ferdinand' in which he said: *Your magnificent and courageous work has contributed in great measure to success of operations on Guadalcanal.* Following the Japanese losses in these operations they mounted an intensive campaign against the Solomon Island based 'Ferdinand' Coastwatchers, resulting in most of them being urgently evacuated, captured or killed.

By 1945, the exemplary courage of the Coastwatchers had made a major contribution to ending the Pacific War and 'Ferdinand' was disbanded. On 26th October 1961, Commander Feldt made a speech in which he described the contribution of 'Ferdinand' to winning the Pacific War. A transcript of that informative speech can be read online through the following Royal Historical Society of Queensland link:

http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:212638/s00855804_1961_1962_6_4_762.pdf



Jack Read, legendary Coastwatcher on Bougainville, on the air with his Teleradio (Ken Wright)

Further reading about the Australian Coastwatchers can be found online at:

<http://www.wv2australia.gov.au/coastwatcher/index.html>

<http://www.pngaa.net/Library/Bougainville.htm>

or from the following books:

The Coast Watchers Commander, Eric A Feldt RAN
ISBN 0-14-014926-0

Lonely Vigil, Coastwatchers of the Solomons. Walter Lord
ISBN 1-59114-466-3

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