

A Retrospective on Some Aspects of the Wartime Airstrip at Reid River

By Andrew Sibley

When it comes to the study of World War II history in Australia it could be asked why Townsville was of any importance. The answer to this question surrounds the construction and operation of airfields during 1942; the impact they had on the course of the war and the longer-term effects of such examples of impromptu cooperation between the United States of America and Australia. These airfields are some of the earliest examples of direct cooperation between the Australian and United States militaries during World War II. They were constructed during a period of time that would lay the foundation for Australia's pivot away from regarding the United Kingdom as its principal ally and the post-war signing of the ANZUS treaty which would go on to shape much of Australia's foreign policy in the second half of the twentieth century.

In a breathtaking feat that would at any other time have been trumpeted as miraculous, many of the airfields were completed by Australian and American personnel in a matter of weeks (Rorrison 315), with a complex of connected airfields stretching from Townsville to Cloncurry, and operated throughout 1942–1945. With the end of the war they were mostly abandoned and



reclaimed by the bush. Reid River southwest of Townsville played host to one of these airfields, with a cumulative runway length greater than the current Townsville airport, but which now remains only as scars and slabs of concrete left on the landscape (LeRoy 34). It is difficult to find a wartime site around Townsville with as many intact features remaining as the Reid River airfield. Others have either been built over or heavily modified.

The Reid River airfield complex was built by



Above: *Figure 1.* Satellite imagery of the Reid River airfield as it appears today. Image taken from Google Maps: <https://www.google.com.au/maps/@-19.774839,146.8428862,4894m/data=!3m1!1e3>.

Inset: *Figure 2.* Outlines of the runways.

American engineering forces in late March 1942 (Le Roy 34). It was the largest airfield between Townsville and Charters Towers and when built was around the same size as Townsville's airport during World War II (Le Roy 8, 34). The 22nd

Bomb Group of the American Fifth Air Force flew out of airfields between Anthill Plains and Reid River and operated a number medium bombers and their escorting pursuit fighters (Nielsen 24). Reid River had three runways and



Figure 3. Beer bottle marked with date of manufacture 1941. Photo taken by author.

supporting infrastructure that looked after both the people and planes that flew out of the airfield in defence of Australia. The Townsville RSL labelled these sites during commemorations marking the fiftieth anniversary of victory in the

Pacific (VP50). The site markers still exist and provide a good verification tool in addition to the original site plan that is still readily available online. Time has not been kind to some of these sites, the field hospital present at the site is now a series of eroded gullies and only by the marker and site plan can it be identified. This has meant however that a number of items buried or discarded at the time are now resurfacing. This includes a dumping site for a large number of bottles. Some of the bottles are marked with the date of manufacture and others show brands that have not survived to the modern day. Among these are a Coca-Cola bottle—a brand only widely introduced to Australia during World War



Figure 4. An example of the markers erected on the Reid River site. Photo taken by author.

II (Coca-Cola np)—an Anders Vestergaards soft drink bottle—a brand local to Mackay (Hall np)—and a number of beer and wine bottles. These artefacts reveal some of the day-to-day realities of the people who worked on and at this airfield.

The need for these airfields arose with the threat presented by the Japanese in Oceania, the fall of Singapore for the British and Australians, and the fall of the Philippines for the United States. Japan pushed south to isolate the Australian continent, trying to eliminate it as a combatant and its use as a potential strategic base for the Americans (Horner 142). To this end after the Japanese Army took the Dutch East Indies and consolidated their holdings with the capture



Figure 5. A B-26 on the runway at Reid River. Taken by Jim Houston, 1943.

of Rabaul, the Japanese Navy pushed south starting what would become to be known as the Battle of the Coral Sea (Horner 142). However, during the period after Rabaul and before Coral Sea was period of a few months. During this time the Australian and American commands were able to plan a counteroffensive (Horner 142). The



Figure 6. Anders Vestergaards soft drink bottle from Mackay. Photo taken by author.

rapidity of this response far outstripped Japanese expectations of mobilisation. The resulting airfields were occupied by the United States Fifth Army Air Force flying a mixture of pursuit aircraft, medium and heavy bombers. The use of medium and heavy bombers is an inherently offensive move and the shows that the United States and Australia were developing not a reactionary strategy, but were rather developing a strike capability against Japanese forces in the region.

This is true of Reid River; the American forces flew B-26 medium bombers from the airstrip used to strike against Japanese naval and land-based assets in the Southwest Pacific Area. The

B-26 was a very modern aircraft for its time, having been developed in the late 30s and early 40s by the Martin Corporation in America and chosen for use by the United States Army Air Corps essentially off the planners table (Sharpe 83). This caused several problems in its first model, the type that was flown at Reid River in 1942 (Sharpe 83). Inexperienced pilots who were taught to fly in planes with more forgiving characteristics could often find themselves getting into trouble during take-off and landing and several Marauders were lost at these airfields during this time (Rundle np and Taylan np).

To this day there remains an area just off the end of the northern runway at Reid River that still



Figure 7. The crash site at the end of the Northern runway. Photo taken by author.

shows the evidence of one such crash. Spent shell casings, melted aluminium and electrical components are strewn over the area, upon which grass still refuses to grow. The Marauder was lost on take-off due to engine failure; it stalled, crashed and was consumed by fire. The incident claimed the lives of all those on board. The .50 calibre cases found at this site were fired prior to the crash, indicated by the fact that the primers had been struck by a firing pin. This is also suggestive of the fact that the plane had recently returned from an operational mission and still carried the fired brass.

Though the Marauder certainly had problems, it was also one of the fastest and safest medium bombers in combat, having the lowest rate of any American bomber for losses due to enemy action in World War II (Sharpe 490). In comparison the RAAF at the time were operating the Bristol Beaufort and Lockheed Hudson in a bombing role (Gillet 63, 75). The top speed of these planes shows the advantages held by the Marauder in a bombing role, 462km/h (Taylor 623) compared to 393km/h for the Hudson (Taylor 595), and 426km/h for the Beaufort (Taylor 209). In comparison the Japanese armed their air force with the Betty bomber, a far more lightly armed and armoured aircraft reaching a maximum speed of 440km/h (Taylor 679). They lacked the capability to field a heavy bomber effectively throughout the war (Taylor 690). This meant that in the areas surrounding Townsville and out to the Cloncurry area as of early April 1942 there existed a force of some of the most



Figure 8. .50 calibre case found at wreck site, the primer has been struck indicating the round was fired prior to the crash. The markings indicate the factory of manufacture and the date, in this case Lake City Army Ammunition Plant, Missouri 1942. Photo by author.

technologically advanced aircraft built in the world.

Comparatively early in the war Australia lacked the means to field a modern effective air force, fielding instead a collection of obsolete aircraft cobbled together over the previous 20 years. An outstanding example of this relative obsolescence is in the Supermarine Southampton, a biplane flying boat utilising engines developed in World War One (Gillet 35). These were replaced in service by a number of more modern aircraft, with orders being placed for the Consolidated Catalina in 1940 and eventually the Martin Mariner in 1943 (Gillet 77). Both planes were monoplanes with far more power available to them and a huge increase in performance thanks to the many years difference between dates of their design. This relatively fast upgrade of Australian technology was partly thanks to the lend lease program that the United States of America instituted with several of its wartime allies; in which the Americans supplied material

aid in return for in kind support or an amount of money to be paid at a later date (Potts 14).

Australia did not end the war as a large debtor to the United States. She had the ability and the strategic location to be able to pay for the American aid with in kind support (Potts 14). The upshot of this at the Townsville airfields, is that though the Americans shipped machines and men to Australia, all ancillary costs and needs were met by Australian support troops and the Australian economy. If an American soldier was ill or injured it was Australian money paying the doctor, if uniforms were needed the Australians would produce them or buy them from the Americans and it was Australian money that provided the Americans with their daily rations and a further supply of sixpence to spend in the quartermaster's store (Potts 14–15). This may explain the bottles sitting on the Reid strip. A regular soft drink supply, which was something of a luxury, is evidence of the cooperation between the Australian and Americans in the minutia.

However, Lendlease was not the only reason for Australia's resurgence as an industrial and strategic ally in the region. Though entering the war with a collection of obsolescent aircraft the RAAF by the end of the war had access to Australian produced weaponry of the highest quality and technological standard. This was due to the mobilisation of not just the military but also the economic resources and man-power of the nation (Alomes 265–266).

Australians must realise to place the nation

on a war footing every citizen must place himself, his private and business affairs, his entire mode of living, on a war footing. The civilian way of life cannot be any less rigorous, can contribute no less than that which the fighting men have to follow.

I demand that Australians everywhere realise that Australia is now inside the fighting lines. (Curtin np)

In regard to the airfields this was to be reflected in the mobilisation of the civilian workforce in the construction of the infrastructure necessary to pursue the Allied offensive plans.

The process of building these airfields was a mixed effort of the Australian and American forces with both Australian civilian contractors and the American Engineer Corps mainly consisting of African-American troops (Moles 124–125). It was a monumental task even by today's standards, with construction continuing unabated on many airfield sites for two weeks at a time, 24 hours day seven days a week. The American Engineers were marched off the arriving boats straight to the fields that they would construct (Moles 125). Australian workers were also given the bare minimum of time to organise their construction details. In some cases, workers were given less than 24 hours between the order to begin construction and commencement of work. Such is the case of Charters Towers airfield:

At this time the engineer Reg Jennings was stationed at Mingela, supervising two road schemes in progress from Reid River. One

The men and machines were moved out and the land the airfields sat on sold off. For many fields this was the inevitable outcome; Reid River was no different.

Sunday morning he received a telephone call from district office advising him that two special trains were being loaded at Townsville with men and machines for Charters Towers in order to build an aerodrome for the American Air Force, due to arrive in four weeks time. He was instructed to move the two camps with the personnel and machines to Charters Towers within 24 hours. . . . Within 48 hours of the first call, there were twenty bull-dozers working, two heavy tractors with rippers, and other machinery preparing for the production of paving materials. . . . Over fifty owner trucks were employed within a week and in many cases worked the clock around with relief drivers. (Rorrison 315)

In several cases construction would begin on airfields only for the fields to be abandoned, or completed but little used, such as in the case of Giru. Giru airfield was built by the American Army Engineers after having been forced marched from the Woodstock area. The airfield was partially completed before being abandoned having been constructed without the use of heavy machinery (LeRoy 38). Overall, in the Townsville region going out to Reid River there were 11 airfields containing a total of 22 runways and

supporting infrastructure to enable the Fifth Army Air Force to fly operational missions (LeRoy 8). This supporting infrastructure also included the largest repair depot for aircraft in the southern hemisphere (McIntyre 59).

These airfields would change Townsville, physically informing the way the town would develop and laying the groundwork for some of the arterial roads along which Townsville has developed. This includes the Ross River Road near the Weir State School and sections of the Flinders Highway towards Charters Towers. So then, the airfields not only shaped Townsville's wartime role, but also the city's future look.

Operationally these airfields only retained their relevance for a few months. This is was the result of the changing fortunes of the Allied war effort. These fields having become operationally ready at the beginning of April 1942 and by early June had become obsolete in the front line against the Japanese. This is due mainly to the decimation of the Japanese carrier forces at the Battle of Midway occurring between 3rd of June and 7th of June. During this battle the Americans sunk much of the Japanese fleet carrier forces (Barber 120–121). This meant that no invasion of Australia could occur, as any invasion force the Japanese Army may have wanted to land would lack the necessary air cover provided by the

Japanese Navy. This also meant a reduction in the threat of Japanese raiding, both naval and air, that Townsville faced. Townsville was bombed on three occasions during 1942 and though the target of the raid, a rail bridge connecting to the port of Townsville, was significant, it would be missed on all attempts (Moles 5–6).

Although these fields had fallen out of use as frontline installations, they were still maintained and staffed throughout the remainder of the war. The 22nd Bomb Group moved closer to the combat zones, first north to Iron Range and later to other locations in Papua New Guinea. The airfield at Reid River was transferred to the RAAF to maintain, but American units continued to be posted to this location throughout the war (LeRoy 36).

These fields and the men that came to operate on them would also have a profound influence on the lifestyle of Townsville. Like many other towns there were pressures exerted on the local population to accommodate newly arrived service personnel. The population of Townsville swelled by a factor of three, which meant that in service personnel outnumbered the local population by a considerable amount (Moles 12). This led to shortages of many of life's essentials including ice, milk, meat and bread (Moles 120–121). This in turn led to a political response by local charismatic politicians such as Tommy Atkins and “Red” Fred Paterson. They reflected local sentiments that Townsville had been isolated and ignored by those in Brisbane and Canberra (Moles 64–67). Such notions persisted

long after the war had concluded, and resulted in Tommy Aitkens maintaining his popularity into the 1970's (Moles 192). Paterson would later become the only elected Communist official in Australian history, serving as a state MP for Bowen (Menghetti np).

The grab for resources did not just affect Townsville but occurred throughout the state where these airfields were constructed. In Charters Towers the local boarding schools were taken over and St Gabriel's was used as a field hospital (Charters Towers and Dalrymple Archives Group np). The remains and relics of this period can be found all along the Flinders Highway and can be seen today in the number of roadside signs proclaiming the existence of a long abandoned historical site. It is in this that the true scale of the operation can be appreciated, a complex stretching around 800 km that was used operationally for barely six months.

This command structure also necessitated the construction of buildings from which to run the campaign and defend Allied assets. Such sites include some of Townsville's remaining World War II relics; the Green Street Bunker out of which elements of the RAAF operated; the MacArthur Place Bunker on Ingham road which was utilised by MacArthur's subordinate General Kenney who planned the air campaign of the Battle of the Coral Sea for the Southwest Pacific Area; and the installations on Castle Hill, Magnetic Island, and around Many Peaks range at Pallarenda, designed to combat Japanese air and naval forces. The airfields were also protected by



Figure 9. The remains of the radar station on Charlie's Hill. Photo taken by L. Sibley.

radar installations in Townsville and south of Home Hill on Charlie's Hill, the remains of the latter are still standing to this day.

Increased reliance on the USA to be Australia's primary ally in the Pacific region was on display around Townsville, forged from politics and necessity. Labor Prime Minister John Curtin spearheaded Australia's developing relationship with the US. Curtin struck up an unlikely friendship with Douglas MacArthur, who—in terms of temperament and political approach—could not be a more different man (Perry 154–155). Curtin turned command of Australia's total armed forces over to MacArthur

upon MacArthur's arrival in Australia. Moreover, Australia sent to the United States a senior government cabinet minister Dr Evatt. After World War II, Evatt would help form the United Nations pushing hard for the rights and purposes of Australia and providing a kernel of action against the domineering in the organisation by the larger victorious allies (Bolton np).

Finally, in 1945 the War with Japan ended and even the ancillary uses these formerly operational fields were performing were no longer sustainable. The men and machines were moved out and the land the airfields sat on sold off. For many fields this was the inevitable outcome; Reid

River was no different. Today, it sits in the middle of a cattle station and its former runways provide open areas for grazing cattle. However, for the observant, the shadows of these airfields remain as laneways between trees or hints of bitumen

and tar under the grass. The ghosts of this regions military history stand as mute testament to a period of intense challenge, sacrifice and the forging of persisting friendships at both the national and personal level.

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