

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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NEWSLETTER 169 FEBRUARY 2022

1942 SPY HUNT— memoir of Walter Brooksbank

In September 2020, the O.D.H. Society received this message from Tim Proust: *“I have information about my Grandfather who was a Royal Aust. Navy Intelligence officer. He was part of a team that was sent from Navy HQ in Melbourne to Orbost during World War II to investigate evidence of Japanese submarines communicating with someone/ones on shore at night. It is quite a charming and funny story and may be of interest to you. My grandfather wrote his memoirs in the late 1960s covering his 40 years with Naval intelligence 1920-60.”*

His memoir titled **“NO CLOAK NO DAGGER: MEMOIRS OF AN AUSTRALIAN NAVAL INTELLIGENCE OFFICER (208p.)** is held by the Australian War Museum, Canberra, along with transcripts of letters written to his family during his service during the First World War where he won the Military Medal at Ypres, and short stories written under the pseudonym ‘Horton Brooks’ relating to experiences in the AIF. Many of his short-stories were published in “The Bulletin”. He also wrote radio plays for the ABC.

THIS NEWSLETTER IS A SHORTENED VERSION OF CHAPTER 11 “SPY HUNT” FROM WALTER’S MEMOIRS. HIS WRITING STYLE MAKES FOR A HUMOROUS AND ENGAGING STORY AND IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THE DETAILED AND TOP SECRET REPORT WHICH HE NO DOUBT MADE FOR THE NAVY.

FOOTPRINTS AND LIGHTS

There had been several instances when merchant vessels, including iron ore carriers, had been either sunk or damaged as a result of Japanese submarine attacks in the Gabo Island area.

I knew that the Security and Military Intelligence also had been investigating a report that footprints had been seen leading from the foreshore to the water’s edge on the lonely stretch of beach extending from Marlo to Cape Everard. There existed a belief that possibly an enemy agent had stationed himself in the locality to provide Jap. submarines with information concerning the movements of our shipping. In support of this belief, a light had been seen on a ridge of the coastal range, and this was interpreted as a signal to the submarine.

I was called in to the D.N.I. [Dept. of Naval Intelligence] to investigate. *“In my opinion, the report is a lot of poppy-cock.”* I remarked. *“As we all know, Gabo Island is a focal point for shipping on the route from Melbourne to Sydney. All a submarine needs to do is to lie off Gabo and bide her time until a target is presented. She doesn’t need to be primed with reports of shipping movements.”*

..... Two mornings later, my fellow spy-catcher Kevin Reilly and I left Melbourne by rail for the town of Orbost.

It had been arranged that we would be accommodated at the Marlo Hotel. Owing to it being a Saturday, it would be necessary for us to stay at the hotel for the week-end. Also, without betraying any interest in the subject, we might be able to pick up some local gossip concerning the supposed

presence of an enemy agent or agents in the district.

While in the holiday season Marlo is quite a popular fishing centre, we found on our arrival at the hotel that the only guests were a honeymoon couple.

On Monday morning, shortly after the local general store opened, we made some purchases including a tent-fly. Then, heavily laden with our packs crammed to the limit and carrying our fishing-rods, we set off along the coast.

Before long, we came across the carcasses of quite a number of cows which had been drowned in the flood-waters and then swept out to sea. Truly a sad sight, but not so our next discovery: lying on the water's edge was the body of a fair-sized grey-nurse shark.

No precise information has been available to use as to where those reported footprints on the beach had been sighted, so as we trudged along, we kept our eyes skinned, without result.

We welcomed the onset of dusk after a hot and tiring day. *"Look, there's an ideal place. From those sandhills we'll be able to look out to the coastal range for any lights."*

Darkness came, but not pitch-dark. Before us was a small half-moon bay, and the water protected by the intervening sandhills, remained calm. This would be an ideal place for a rubber boat from a submarine to make a landing I thought.

"Look." Suddenly Kevin gripped my arm. "On the top of that ridge directly ahead — a light."

But now something else had excited my attention. A little more than 100 yards away, right at the water's edge where the sandhills started to project from the coastline, there was now a further light. My pulses quickened. I drew Kevin's attention to it.

"My God, yes. You're right."

"This is beginning to look like it." I exclaimed. *"That might well be Enemy Agent No.21. We'd better get our revolvers ready."*

We waited in dead silence, listening for the sound of a rubber boat's paddle, but heard none.

Our hearts beating, we cautiously moved towards the light. After we had gone about 40 yards, I called a temporary halt, and both of us now crouched down.

"Look, look!" From the tenseness of his whisper, something had excited my fellow spy-catcher's attention. *"That light on the ridge has now shifted above it! It seems to be suspended in mid-air!"*

Do you think, do you think that...?

I raised my eyes in that direction. *"No doubt about it!"* I exclaimed. *"That light we've been seeing is no more than a star!"* My mind working swiftly, I transferred my gaze back to the light down there below. *"Look Kevin, that light has now shifted a little from the water's edge, and if I'm not mistaken, it is only the reflection of that self-same star!"*

In the morning, we pondered over the matter. We could have returned to Marlo, but our instructions were to proceed along the coast to Cape Everard where there was an automatic unattended lighthouse and also a post manned by a small detachment of the Volunteer Defence Corps.

In spite of our sleepless night, we quickened our pace, and it was very late in the afternoon before we drew near Cape Everard. A sentry armed with a rifle, with bayonet fixed and slung from his shoulder, came along the beach to meet us.

"The V.D.C. should be able to give us transport back to Marlo." I remarked to Kevin. But on our drawing closer, the sentry had brought his rifle and bayonet to the alert, and his manner was unmistakably hostile. He was an elderly man.

To reassure him, I moved forward to introduce ourselves. ***"We're from Navy Office, Melbourne." After giving our names, I started to explain. But I got no further for the man had now thrust his bayonet uncomfortably close to my stomach!***

"Think you'll get away with that cock-and-bull story, do you?" He scowled and continued to scrutinise us closely. A shadow of a doubt now passed over his features. *"From Navy Office you say? Got any papers to prove it?"*

"Well, no," I answered. We had been carrying identification papers as a matter of prudence in the event of capture, however unlikely, by enemy agents.

But before I had been given a chance to explain, he was at me again.

"No, I thought not!" he grunted. *"I've got the strength of you two, believe me! A couple of spies disguising' yourselves as fishermen, that's what you bastards are!"* Then, tilting his rifle and bayonet momentarily towards the sea. *"Givin' secret information to Jap submarines out there! Doan tell be, I knows all about it!"*

"Well, what do you know about that" I said turning to Kevin. *"He takes us for a couple of spies. It's altogether too laughable!"*

His attitude was now even more menacing.

“Now don’t you try to sidetrack me. Just you move on, you two, and I’ll follow right behind you. And no funny business, or else!”

The way he was wagging his rifle and bayonet first to one of us and then to the other was sufficient warning. So, with the sentry close behind us, we went to the V.D.C. post.

A Corporal came forward and soon satisfied himself as to our bona-fides.

Along with four other members of the Corps, we spent the night in one of the tents of the V.D.C., another sleepless night as we were nearly devoured by mosquitoes.

During the course of our return railway journey, my fellow spy-hunter remarked to me, “Those blasted mosquitoes put the tin-hat on it all. I don’t know what you think about it, but no more spy-hunting for me!”



Walter Brooksbank (PHOTO AT RIGHT)

Walter (b.1895, d.1981) was born in Lyndoch SA, one of 3 sons of an Anglican minister who managed the parish there, later moving to Williamstown. He attended Melb. Grammar School then one year of law at Melb. Uni. which was interrupted by enlistment for WW1 where he served in Egypt, Gallipoli and France.

After the War, he joined the Dept of Navy about 1920 where he started in the accounts section but moved into intelligence in a clerical role and was soon involved on intelligence tasks.

He became the civil assistant to the Director of Naval Intelligence, Commander Rupert Long (a well-known and iconic figure within Aust. Naval Intelligence). During the 20's and 30's he worked on a number of projects including extensive periods on RAN ships reviewing security in PNG and SW Pacific areas. It appears even then the threat of Japanese influence in the area was obvious and Wally became involved in organising a "Coast Watching" service using Aust. plantation owners, settlers and patrol officers. He worked closely with people like Commander Eric Feldt and many others. With war in the Pacific, the role of coast watchers was absolutely critical in supplying information to the Allies.

Walter (Wally) was commissioned as a naval officer (Lieutenant Commander RANVR) to provide him with more authority as he went on operational duties in the SW Pacific including the US landings at Guadalcanal. Being a commissioned officer provided him with more gravitas when dealing with the US Navy/Marines etc. He also worked for a time at Royal Navy HQ in Whitehall naval intelligence where his immediate mentor was Ian Fleming the creator of James Bond.

Wally retired from Naval Intelligence in 1957. He was part of the committee involved in the funding and construction of the Coastwatchers Memorial Lighthouse in Madang PNG & attended its opening in 1959.

It is interesting to hear that in December 2021, Caroline Kennedy (daughter of US President John F Kennedy) was announced as the next US appointment as Ambassador to Australia. In her statement of acceptance, she acknowledged the work of the Aust. Coastwatchers in rescuing her father when his patrol boat sank after colliding with a Japanese destroyer in 1943 in the PNG/Solomons area.

Although it is likely that Coastwatchers played an important role in surveillance and reporting throughout coastal Australia, the exact location and details of their work in eastern Victoria is not reported here. Anyone with knowledge on this topic is asked to please respond.

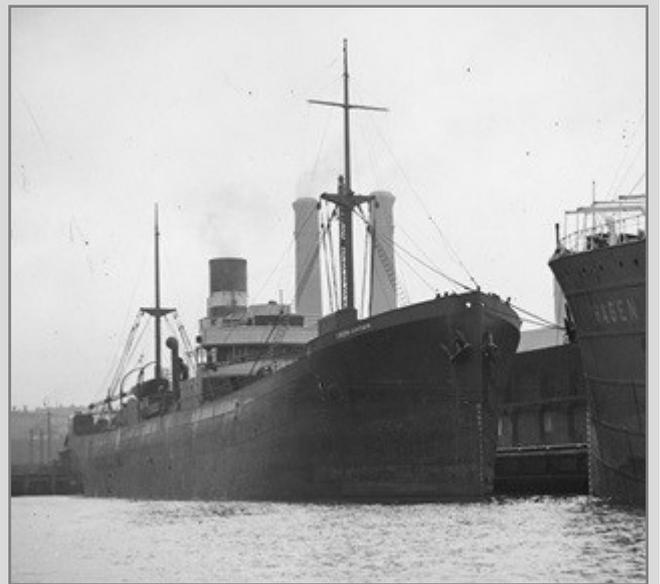
1942 WAS A TIME OF HEIGHTENED ANXIETY IN AUSTRALIA. IN FEBRUARY, DARWIN WAS BOMBED, FOLLOWED BY BROOME IN MARCH AND TOWNSVILLE IN JULY. IN MAY CAME THE ATTACK BY MINI-SUBMARINES IN SYDNEY HARBOUR. AUSTRALIA WAS ON HIGH ALERT TO INVASION AND THE WHOLE POPULATION WAS ON-EDGE.

People lived with blackout curtains, children dug trenches in their school grounds and were trained to take shelter when a siren was sounded, car headlights were shielded to show minimal light, and people volunteered for the VOAC (Volunteer Observers Air Corps). It was a tense time also because of the many restrictions on movement, on fuel and food. Also many had loved-ones serving overseas.

On 4 June 1942, the **SS IRON CROWN (PHOTO TOP RIGHT)** was sunk by a torpedo from a Japanese submarine about 100 km. off Gabo Island. It was carrying manganese and sank with the loss of 38 of its 43 crew. In 2019, the wreck of the SS Iron Crown was finally located.

Along the beaches from Marlo to Mallacoota, there were reports of unusual footprints. It was not a difficult stretch to interpret these as belonging to Japanese sub-mariners who had come ashore for some reason, maybe searching for water. It was reports of these footprints which led to Walter Brooksbank coming here in (possibly) November 1942. There were also reports of unusual lights.

JIKA-TABI BOOTS (PHOTO AT RIGHT) were worn by Japanese troops and have a distinctive split-toe design and no doubt make unusual imprints in sand. Finding such prints or anything that looked like these was extremely alarming.



The Orbost Museum has a fine collection of items relating to World War II, including military kit and uniforms, medals, magazines, and photos .

Some items which relate to the local civilian response are:

- **RATION TICKETS**
- **HEAD LIGHT COVERS FOR VEHICLES (PHOTO ABOVE RIGHT)**
- **ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE VOLUNTEER AIR OBSERVERS CORPS CERTIFICATE** awarded to Anita Armistead whose son served in Malaya during World War II
- **AN AIR RAID SIREN** which was installed on the roof of G P Motors **(PHOTO AT LEFT)**

