

# Wilson's Promontory: the War Years 1939-1945, by Terry Synan

**T**erry Synan qualified as a secondary teacher at Melbourne University in the mid-1950s. For the next 15 years he taught history and other subjects in State high schools. He then joined Catholic Education and was an administrator and Director in the Diocese of Sale, Gippsland, for 25 years, as well as holding other positions across Victoria. He was a member of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, the Victorian section of the Schools Commission, and the Victorian Catholic Schools Association, the industrial arm of Catholic schooling, which he chaired for four and a half years. During retirement he researched the role Wilson's Promontory played in Australia's defences during World War 2. This chapter, written in the 1990s, presents a synopsis of his findings.

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Under the Victorian National Parks Service (NPS) of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (CNR)<sup>1</sup>, Wilson's Promontory is one of Victoria's protected natural areas. However, there were times when the Prom in its turn played vital roles in protecting the nation. Since 1859 South-east Point has hosted a lighthouse devoted to assisting shipping through Bass Strait. During wartime, the Prom was assigned key defence roles – in a smaller way during World War 1, but in a large and significant way during World War 2.

Wilson's Promontory is strategically located on the Australian continent. It reaches almost 40 km into Bass Strait, virtually bisecting the important Sydney-Melbourne sea lane and presenting a commanding interrogation post for all ships using that route. When the Department of the Navy, Melbourne, decided to establish lookout-positions around the coastline during wartime, South-east Point with its clear seaward views became a prime location.

Given the historical break in railway gauges between the States, coastal shipping carried 80-90 per cent of Australia's interstate trade. The most important sea lane linked the ports of Sydney and Melbourne. The bulk of international shipping also focused on these ports. Accordingly, enemies had little difficulty in deciding where best to attack when bringing Australia's security under threat.

As WW 1 progressed, the Navy Office (Department of Defence) established War Signal Stations at Cape Howe, Cape Otway and Wilson's Promontory. This strategy was doubtless prompted by a daring German naval raid on the Sydney-Melbourne sea lane.

In November 1916 the raider *Wolf* set sail from Kiel Harbour on a 15-month cruise of the world's oceans, attacking allied shipping and mining shipping lanes. After crossing the Tasman Sea, *Wolf* set down a minefield beside Gabo Island and another near Point Hicks. On 5 July 1917, the

*Cumberland*, a Federal Steam Navigation Company vessel carrying an important cargo of mail, meat, wool, lead, copper and canned fruit, bound for England, struck a mine and had to be beached on Gabo Island. (Loney, 1993)

As a consequence the RAN established a Minesweeping Section in July 1917, and set up lookout positions at Cape Otway, Wilson's Promontory and Cape Howe in April 1918. Other locations followed. A station crew consisted of a Yeoman of Signals, a Leading Signaller and three signallers. They were to report shipping movements, aircraft and any suspicious lights in the vicinity of each station. Naval personnel were accommodated in tents. The South-east Point station ceased operation at the end of hostilities.

## War Signal Station, Wilson's Promontory

With gathering storm clouds in the late 1930s signifying another war with Germany, the Naval Office, Department of Defence, Melbourne, looked again at establishing War Signal Stations (WSSs) at a number of key points around the continent. Consequently, Wilson's Promontory gained a substantial station with a raised signal bridge plus mast and yard arm, as well as draughty unlined huts for storage, accommodation and supply purposes.

The naval crew consisted of an Officer in Command, a Yeoman of Signals, a Leading Signaller, four signallers, a cook, sick berth attendant and an Officer's Steward. The station was established on Commonwealth property at South-east Point on 22 October 1939. Its task was to keep naval authorities informed of all shipping using Bass Strait as well as reporting aircraft movements and other relevant information gathered. Through the use of signal flags and an acetylene-powered lamp, the station became a communications link between naval ships and the Royal Australian Navy, transmitting orders and advice and receiving information from passing ships (Nesdale, 1984). The WSS functioned very efficiently in good weather but in foul Prom conditions sea lane visibility was seriously reduced no matter how powerful the spy glass and binoculars.

In late October 1940, another German raider, the *Passat*, visited Bass Strait's sea lanes and laid a number of minefields. Explaining its erratic course, it signalled the possible loss of a man overboard. Late on the night of 7 November, the British Freighter *Cambridge* struck a mine some 3.5 km off South-east Point and sank with the loss of one life. The surviving crew rowed three lifeboats towards Wilson's Promontory, signalling the WSS to report the sinking. Next day an American ship

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*City of Rayville* hit a mine south of Cape Otway, also sinking with the loss of one crew. Bass Strait was closed to all shipping while a fleet of minesweepers cleared the sea lanes (Loney, 1993).

As the war progressed, WSS Wilsons Promontory continued its vital naval communications work as troop convoys, various naval ships and squadrons and numbers of convoys passed by. It also played an intriguing role in the tragic disappearance of the *Sydney*, sunk off Carnarvon (WA), in November 1941 with the loss of all 645 officers and crew when it encountered and sank the German raider *Kormoran*. Most of the German sailors escaped their stricken ship, and on 27 November the troop ship *Aquitania* signalled South-east Point that it had 26 German crew on board, picked up on 23 November in the Indian Ocean. Fearing the possible presence of enemy craft still in the vicinity, *Aquitania's* captain did not stop or break radio silence to notify authorities of his captives. This communication provided further detail of an unfolding drama - Australia's greatest maritime tragedy and mystery (Olson, 2000). [The site of the sunken *Sydney* was discovered in 2008.]

The Commanding Officer at WSS Wilsons Promontory was Lieutenant Malcolm B Gale. He ran a tight ship, ensuring his crew took all responsibilities seriously. They had to withstand the rigours of chilly gale-force winds and driving rain. From the station's earliest days there were serious communication difficulties between the Lighthouse and the Foster telephone exchange. The telephonic link was often rendered faulty by 'earth leaks', caused when dampness or vegetation shorted the weak electrical signal impulses (Australian Archives, Melbourne 1). This connection also served as a party line for farmers along its route. When the Army and Airforce demanded a share of this overloaded communication link, the Navy justifiably felt outraged. The installation of an AWA teleradio back-up facility did little initially to improve communication reliability. This was only achieved after the Post Master General's Department, stretching its scarce wartime resources, caused the land line to be considerably upgraded.

Sadly, no evidence of this important wartime facility now exists. Buildings and other evidence of the WSS fell victim to the calamitous fire of February 1951 which burnt three-quarters of the Prom from north to south, finally racing onto South-east Point and sparing little besides the lighthouse itself. The front page of *The Argus* of 14 February 1951 had a large aerial photograph of the damage done to the Lighthouse settlement under the banner headline 'This Place is Burning (but the light didn't fail)'. Piles of ashes mark where War Signal Station facilities once stood.

## No 7 Infantry Training Centre

With WW 2 came the proposal from London for Australia and New Zealand to train shock troops, or commandos. Wilsons Promontory, the chosen location for this project, became, as a consequence, a high security 'Top Secret' military area for much of the war period. Relatively isolated, mostly surrounded by sea and with an easily secured isthmus linking it to the mainland, Wilsons Promontory seemed ideally placed and away from prying eyes. The Prom also greatly appealed because it was mostly unsettled National Park containing a rich variety of topographical features and vegetation cover. Accordingly, a considerable range of commando training environments was available - mountains, plains, seascapes, sand dunes, mud flats, swamps, rivers, eucalypt forests, coastal scrub and open grasslands. Access to the area had just been upgraded with a new tourist road to Darby River which linked that area to railheads at Fish Creek and Foster.

Humbling defeats in 1940 suffered by the British in Norway and at Dunkirk at the hands of well-organised German forces, and the capitulation of France, left London's military strategists with no land army in Western Europe opposing the Nazi menace. Their thoughts turned to using commando units in order to carry out fast-moving sabotage and intelligence missions. They were also concerned that Nazi, Fascist and Japanese fifth-column cells were active in various countries. As a consequence, Military Mission 104 was dispatched to New Zealand and Australia to advise on military intelligence and to set up an Independent Company Training Centre at Wilsons Promontory (Callinan, 1989).

Called No 7 Infantry Training Centre, it had a Headquarters Camp at the Darby River, a No 1 Camp adjacent to the present-day Lilly Pilly Gully car park, and a No 2 Camp in the location today occupied by the Tidal River camping area. Headquarters Camp had two sections. One, north of the Darby River bridge, had sufficient floored tents to sleep 35 Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and Sergeants, 46 Corporals and 62 Privates. The other, south of the bridge, incorporated the Chalet and tents for 56 Officers. Both sections contained mess huts, lecture huts, ablutions and latrines, a combined kitchen plus store rooms and workshops. The old Chalet served as part of the Officers' facilities. A canteen hut stood on the south side of Darby River close to the bridge. Initial Cadre and NCO training occurred at Headquarters Camp. It also contained a Camp Dressing Station with six beds, a signals workshop, explosives stores and an Armourers workshop. Army Instructional personnel, Army transport units and other service corps members were located at the Darby River camp. (Australian Archives, Melbourne, 2)

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No 1 Camp near Lilly Pilly Gully contained tent accommodation for a complete Independent Company, plus three mess huts, and other huts for lectures, recreation, storage, drying and ablutions, as did No 2 Camp at Tidal River. The latter was built to train New Zealand Independent Companies and was paid for by the New Zealand Government. Both camps had canteens and a field firing range nearby. (Australian Archives, Melbourne, 3)

The Military Mission was led by Lieut.-Colonel J C Mawhood, who served in the Australian Army during WW 1 but had later gained both Indian army and intelligence experience, including some association with M15. He had with him a team of four expert soldiers and a shipment of the latest explosives and infantry weapons available in Britain. His team also included Captain Freddie Spencer Chapman, fieldcraft; Captain Michael Calvert (Mad Mike), engineers and explosives; Warrant Officer Frank Misselbrook, signals and wireless telegraphy; and Warrant Officer Peter Stafford, weapons training.

On completing their Australian – New Zealand training assignment, the four soldier specialists were posted to India and South-east Asia to fight the Japanese war. Calvert became famous first as a daring assistant to the legendary Major-General Orde Wingate in Burma, and later during the Malayan emergency, where he became pivotal in developing modern SAS-style forces (Weale, 1997). He and Chapman left indelible impressions on the New Zealand and early Australian Independent Companies trained under their direction. Command of No 7 Infantry Training Centre went initially to Major W.J.R. Scott DSO, one of Australia's most intriguing military personalities of the two world wars and the inter-war period. He played an important role with the secret armies of the 1930s (Campbell, 1965). Scott handed command to Major Stuart Love, also a much-decorated WW 1 soldier, in May 1941.

At the outset a military-use agreement was struck between the Defence Department and the Victorian Government, which held title to the National Park. Premier Albert Dunstan and Park Committee members Messrs Northey, Chairman, and Kershaw, Secretary, agreed to the military using the area but negotiated for certain conditions that would provide some level of protection for the Park and the resources of the Park Committee. The Army agreed to the issuing of special orders to troops aimed at a level of protection for this sensitive ecological area. It also agreed that road construction from Darby to Tidal River and the water supply systems it had to install would remain as tourist facility improvements. The Department of Defence agreed to pay compensation for use of the Chalet and for Committee loss of revenue during army occupancy.

The Army agreed to leave facilities in a similar state of repair to that when their occupancy commenced. In order to have some insight into what might be occurring in the Park, it was also agreed that the Committee would retain its two Rangers, though the Army would pay their wages (Australian Archives, Melbourne, 4). As events turned out one ranger, Alf Miller, joined the army. Only John Sparkes continued in the Ranger role during the war years.

The Defence Department held an option to purchase the Committee's 23 hire horses, though this was never exercised. However, the Committee was released from its agreement with Mrs Clendenning, the lessee of the Chalet, who was compensated by the Department, as were the various holders of grazing rights. The Department also agreed to purchase a small bungalow at the Chalet which was on offer to the Park Committee.

During 1941 and 1942 eight Australian and two New Zealand Independent Companies trained at Wilsons Promontory. A company comprised 273 soldiers. It possessed a higher proportion of officers than regular army units – a Major commanding, five Captains and eleven Lieutenants. Its sub-structure consisted of three platoons, each of 60 men commanded by a Captain. Platoons contained three sections each with a Lieutenant in charge. Independent Companies also had medical staff, engineers or sappers, a transport section, a signal section and a wide range of skills in those selected to join them (McNab, 1998).

Intended to operate independently of larger army groups, they carried a wider assortment of weapons including pistols, rifles, light machine guns, sub-machine guns, mortars, grenades and signal pistols. All members had to have completed basic training prior to recruitment and were expected to display initiative, a spirit of adventure, and superior military skills. Recruits had to be young and exceptionally fit physically. Other Army commanders were directed by Headquarters to send forth the names of only their best soldiers.

Each Independent Company undertook its commando training in two parts. First the officers and NCOs received six weeks of intensive training from instructional staff. In turn the officer cadre trained the ordinary ranks at No 1 and No 2 Camps for another intensive six weeks. Once this was completed the Independent Companies were formed from the soldiers who stayed the course. Training involved a strict timetable of lectures, field exercises, physical endurance tests, air-army co-operation exercises and amphibious naval exercises. A typical training day could include fieldcraft experience, demolitions, a hill climb and swim, physical exercises and weapons training. The day's program commenced at 8.00 am, finishing at 8.30 pm. Night lectures or a night march which



Trainee commandos crossing grassland at Wilsons Promontory, c.1941.  
Photo courtesy Historic Places, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria

included wading the Darby River in battle order might follow. A map-reading exercise would be combined with a cross-country treasure hunt or a battle exercise between opposing Australian and New Zealand Troops (Larson, 1945). Exercises were undertaken in full battle dress with full packs using live ammunition and simulating war conditions. Men were taught how to blow up buildings, bridges, communications facilities and army vehicles as well as how to use field radios and co-ordinate activities to meet up with pre-arranged air drops of food and ammunition. Camouflage was studied, as was ambush, these being backed up with lectures on commando tactics and infiltration techniques.

No 7 Infantry Training Centre was formally established in January 1941. In February the training of the Officer Cadre and NCOs commenced for the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Independent Company along with No 1 New Zealand Special Company. The 2/1<sup>st</sup> Independent Company was formed at Wilsons Promontory in May 1941 when training finished. On 7 July, it began the move to Sydney and on 12 July it left on the *Zealandia* for Rabaul and the islands north of New Guinea where, as part of 'Lark Force', it added to Australia's forward defence strategy. New Zealand No 1 Special Company did reach the war location Australian companies initially expected to go to – North Africa and the Middle East. Sadly, however, they never fought as a unit but were split up by General Fryberg around various other New Zealand

units. Similarly, No 2 New Zealand Special Company never served as a unit, although some of its members did join and train commando units in the Pacific fighting the Japanese. It seems the Hush Hush Companies, as the New Zealanders called them, were too hot to handle for that country's military and political leaders, and as a consequence great military opportunity was lost to the allies.

The other Australian Independent Companies include the 2/2<sup>nd</sup>, sent to East Timor as part of the ill-fated 'Sparrow Force', the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> sent to New Caledonia, the 2/4<sup>th</sup> which relieved the 2/2<sup>nd</sup> in East Timor, and the 2/5<sup>th</sup>, 2/6<sup>th</sup>, 2/7<sup>th</sup> and 2/8<sup>th</sup> all of which acquitted themselves with honour fighting Japanese forces in New Guinea and the Solomons. All these units had a significant impact on the Pacific War. For a period in early 1942, the 2/2<sup>nd</sup> Independent Company, fighting a classic guerilla war, was the only allied force not defeated or neutralised by the all-conquering Japanese forces following Pearl Harbour. The 2/1<sup>st</sup>, however, had a tragic war. Many of them had been held captive by the Japanese at Rabaul and were being transported in the *Montevideo Maru* in June 1942 bound for internment on Hainan Island in the South China Sea. The American submarine *Sturgeon*, unaware that this ship carried 1050 Rabaul captives, sank it, killing all prisoners on board including 133 Independent Company personnel (McNabb, 1998).

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No 7 Infantry Training Centre soon became known as the Guerilla Warfare School, Foster, and in time Independent Companies were reorganised into Commando Squadrons. However, as the Pacific and not the European war became the focus of military endeavour, Army authorities recognised that this facility would be more useful if it operated in a tropical rather than a cool temperate location. In November 1942, therefore, the training school moved to Canungra, Queensland, causing the Army to have a realistic look at the future of the Wilsons Promontory facility.

During its short life training ten top army fighting units, No 7 Infantry Centre had been considered by the Army as a showpiece of military initiative. Many highly placed foreign military personnel were sent there to see the facility and witness what it achieved. It also played a secondary role no longer recalled: it trained cadre groups from Northern Command which, in turn, were planned to form guerilla bands in Australia's North. Had an invasion of mainland Australia occurred these units would have been used to cut supply lines and harass and ambush invaders from behind in classic guerilla warfare style. Also trained at Wilsons Promontory were officers from all States serving with the Voluntary Defence Corps (Australian Archives, Melbourne, 5).

The continuance of the Wilsons Promontory Camp came into question as the decision to close the Guerilla Warfare School eventuated. On 30 September 1942 an inspection of facilities revealed a serious problem with sewage and sillage disposal. Some camp areas had become fouled and considerable expenditure was required to put matters right. By late November, Major General E.C.P. Plant, the General Officer in Command in Victoria, proposed that the Prom site be abandoned, even though the original agreement with the Victorian Government was to keep it for army use until the end of hostilities.

A high-placed inspection group visited the area on 28 and 29 December, including seven senior army personnel plus a Mr F Russell (IGA) and Messrs Northey and Lulie from the Lands Department, Victoria. In view of previous undertakings, it was considered unfair to hand the Chalet back at a time when the Park Committee would have found it impossible to re-let, or indeed to use the National Park. (National Archives, Melbourne, 6).

Damage to the site required a large amount of restoration and compensation. There was damage to the Chalet, fencing (including the rabbit-proof fence), missing gates, a need for parade-ground grass restoration, and various trenches and observation pits to be filled in. Sensitive sand dune areas were blowing and in need of marram grass plantings. Car wrecks used for demolition practice needed clearance, and

items were missing from the Chalet inventory. At the time of this inspection the Army was removing camp equipment, so a further inspection was arranged to finalise proposals for the State government. Certain buildings and installations, such as the hospital block and sanitary and ablution blocks at Darby River, would be retained by the State for Park Committee use. No 1 Camp was declared of no use by the Committee, and there was a concern that facilities at No 2 Camp Tidal River were 'wrongly placed' for peace-time park operation. Electricity generating capacity and water facilities were left operative but most huts and installations were marked for demolition or removal. Lastly, a year's rental was allowed to compensate against loss of Committee revenue for the duration-of-war clause. State Government was charged for the bungalow that the Defence Department had earlier secured.

While all these matters were being sorted out the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Medium Regiment came to Wilsons Promontory complete with heavy trucks towing field guns for military exercises from 1 January to 17 March 1943. Demolition of huts and buildings commenced on 23 March. Huts were conveyed in sections to the Fish Creek railway yard and sent by rail to Melbourne for distribution to locations such as Camp Pell, Caulfield, Broadmeadows, Point Lonsdale, Dandenong, Harrisfield and Fisherman's Bend. The latter location gained 12 of the buildings. Two huts were retained at the Prom for use by the RAAF at Yanakie in a quest to improve the quite poor facilities at the aerodrome (Australian Archives, Melbourne, 7).

## **AOB Yanakie**

The RAAF's familiarity with Wilsons Promontory dated from the 1930s, when it used Yanakie as a landing field during training flights from Point Cook. Photographs exist of a flight of Westland Wapitis landed there. During 1935 Messrs Pilkington, Sandy Point, and Grimshaw, Fish Creek, had a contract to scoop away the sand ridges on the airfield and grade the area level. Messrs M. Farrell and Hamilton of Fish Creek were also employed on this project (Noonan, 1969). In 1938 the Lyons Ministry announced a major defence program upgrade. In recognition of Australia's vulnerability against aircraft launched from enemy surface raiders, it contained funding to develop and upgrade coastal air defences. Consequently, within Gippsland, aerodromes were developed at Mallacoota, Bairnsdale and Yanakie. Other airfields were built at Apollo Bay, Pat's River (Flinders Island) and Currie (King Island), ensuring Bass Strait's strategic protection. The strategic importance of Yanakie and many other such fields was officially recognised when they were declared



Wilson's Promontory lighthouse, 1950s.  
Photo courtesy Historic Places, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria

Advanced Operational Bases (AOBs) soon after WW 2 commenced.

Mr Charles Snell, a contractor in the Foster district, won the contract to extend Yanakie airfield so that it became capable of handling medium bombers and reconnaissance planes in all weathers. Because of a good depth of sand, landing and take-off areas were grassed and unmarked. The East-West area allowed 1.6 km; the North-South 1.3 km. Fencing was necessary to keep the airfield free of native animals and agisted stock. Various airfield facility buildings were constructed on the southern side of the area and included fibro-cement living quarters, a wireless hut, a bomb dump and galvanised iron sheds for storage, latrine, fuel store and a pyrotechnic store. During the course of the war twelve rainbow-shaped dispersal hangers or hideouts were framed up with camouflage netting covering them. They were located on the southern and western sides of the aerodrome well back in tea-tree scrub and linked to the landing area by taxiways.

In early 1942 the State Defence Camouflage Committee, Victoria, submitted a proposal for AOB Yanakie. It proposed a 'Farm layout' whereby cattle could be turned onto plots using obstruction fences to give the appearance from the air of a farming property. The RAAF living quarters, with a front verandah added, might resemble a farm house while all other buildings could be made resemble various farm sheds. The idea of cattle roaming the airfield found no favour with the RAAF. In fact the particular location of this airfield, surrounded by mountainous terrain, swamps, and sand dunes, concerned the RAAF authorities and prompted a request for a 'more open aerodrome' further north beyond Yanakie (Australian Archives, Canberra, 1). In 1941 the east-west runway direction was lengthened westward and the Yanakie Road diverted around it. Bushfires and grass length hindering planes taking off

were other concerns for the RAAF.

Yanakie aerodrome had two main purposes. It was part of the coastal surveillance system, and a vital link for aerial convoy escort duty. A small housekeeping staff, consisting of about a dozen airmen, operated and maintained AOB Yanakie. This number was augmented by up to 25 additional airmen when planes came in from patrol or other duties for crews to rest overnight. In the early days of WW 2, No 2 Squadron carried out anti-submarine and convoy escort duties using Avro Ansons, and later Lockheed Hudsons. Other units to use Yanakie included No 7 Squadron when it was based at Bairnsdale in mid-1942, and No 1 Operational Training Unit flying out of East Sale. However, the major user, after its formation in January 1943 at Laverton, was No 67 Squadron. It was a general reconnaissance RAAF unit with 14 Avro Ansons. It had responsibility for anti-submarine patrols and southern sea-lane escort duties and flew from Laverton, Warrnambool, Yanakie, Bairnsdale and Mallacoota (RAAF Units, History, 1995). It carried out continuous seaward patrols in the early months of 1943 when Yanakie was at its busiest. There were a number of possible submarine sightings during this period but no reported 'kills'. However, some non-combatant whales mistaken for submarines lost their lives by mischance. During the early years of war up to six aircraft per day used Yanakie, but as hostilities moved away from Australia, aircraft use frequency declined to three or less per day.

At war's end the RAAF indicated it had no further use for Yanakie, so responsibility for the airfield fell again to the Department of Civil Aviation. Mr Perc. Gilbert became caretaker in 1946 with responsibility for keeping the airfield operative, but few planes landed there. He and his family lived in the former RAAF accommodation. When Civil Aviation took charge he was appointed groundsman, a position he held until 1949. In 1969 the southern portion of the Yanakie area, including the airfield, was added to the National Park.

### **No 14 Radar Station**

The fourth military installation located on Wilsons Promontory during WW 2 was the most secret of all its military facilities. No 14 Radar Station was located on Commonwealth property at South-east Point, tight up against the Lighthouse on its seaward side. The former operations concrete blockhouse now serves as an observation area for viewing Bass Strait. This facility, built in the early war years, housed state-of-the-art radar equipment under RAAF operation. Mounted atop this structure was a large rotating array or aerial measuring 15 by 18 feet. No 14 Radar Station was one of a set protecting the sea lanes along the southern coastline to the Port of Melbourne. Others were at Cape Otway, Metung and Gabo Island. They provided

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eyes over Bass Strait, monitoring shipping and aircraft movements. Together these stations were part of a large network of radar installations dotted around the Australian coastline and in some strategic inland locations (Simmonds, 1995).

Radio Direction Finding (RDF) technology, developed in the United Kingdom, proved invaluable during the Battle of Britain. With adaptation to Australian requirements, RDF became more portable and flexible. This allowed relative ease of installation in difficult locations. The equipment installed at the Prom was Australian designed and manufactured. When set up in June 1942, it was as sophisticated as any systems then operating. Accordingly the highest level of secrecy applied even after the war ended. As a result, RAAF personnel, such as those staffing the Prom unit, only years later received the acknowledgment due to them for their significant wartime contributions.

When No 14 Radar Station began operating the Commanding Officer was Pilot Officer S.D.L. Horwitz. He had a staff of 35 personnel under his command. They included radar operators, mechanics, guards, cooks, a mess orderly, a clerk and fitters to maintain the petrol motors and generators providing station power and electricity for the living quarters constructed at the Lighthouse settlement.

No 14 Radar Station operated on a 24 hour cycle, using four six-hour shifts. Each shift had four radar operators and one mechanic. Operators varied their work every half-hour. Given the mental and visual fatigue involved in reading the small cathode ray oscilloscope or 'tube', efficiency would decline if an operator stayed on that task longer. Other assignments included plotting object movements on a grid-referenced map of the area, and passing plot details by telephone onto No 7 Fighter Sector in the Preston Town Hall. Fighter Sector received information from all Victorian radar stations and took decisions on further necessary steps. It could request that the radar station continue tracking a particular object, or order an aeroplane to check out the area and, if necessary, take military action.

The heart of the radar station was the tube in the receiver unit with its thin green horizontal trace or line bisecting the screen horizontally. It represented, from left to right, 0 to 130 miles. On the trace line operators observed small vertical movements or 'grass'. A shift in the length of the 'grass' indicated that the transmitter and receiver equipment had picked up an echo or 'blip' from the direction the aerial faced. The aerial gave the bearing, and adjusting the blip to the centre of the tube measured the distance. From this information a plot was made on the map. Continued readings gave a series of plots for transmission to Fighter Sector.

Operationally, No 14 Radar Station proved to be a very difficult facility. Not only was it quite isolated, making it hard for personnel to reach, it was also difficult to provision with stores, fuel and equipment. The *Cape York* conveyed all heavy materials to the flying fox running from the landing ramp up to the Lighthouse settlement. RAAF staff had to man the fox each week to land fuel and other stores. Mail, meat and bread were conveyed by Army pack horses along the Lighthouse track every second day. Leave-takers had to run or walk this track and a contest developed as to who could do the fastest time. Fit leave-takers covered the 15 mile trek to Tidal River in under 3 hours. However, in winter the track became a line of bogs churned up by the horses.

Of even greater difficulty was the severe weather experienced on the exposed Lighthouse peninsula. Winds would quickly gather to gale-force strength and rain would be driven into the huts. In such conditions the array had to be tied down fixed in one direction, an event repeated with much frequency. The radar station could then operate only on a fixed bearing, or cease operations altogether for several hours or days. This defect combined with periodic equipment failure, which also proved difficult to rectify because of the isolation (Australian Archives, Canberra 2).

However, when the radar equipment functioned well, this station produced remarkable results, identifying ship movements up to 30 miles distant and aircraft at 60 miles and beyond. In good conditions some 100 or more plots per day would be passed onto Fighter Sector. In difficult conditions the number halved or dropped to zero.

As the Pacific War moved north, performance pressure on No 14 Radar Station diminished. This was reflected in manning levels. The Operations Record Book reveals establishment numbers dropping to two Officers and 30 other ranks in March 1943, then to a total of 26, July 1944 and 17 in October 1944, and to 12 in May 1945. When the station closed in November 1945 it was staffed by only six personnel. On 15 August 1945, the operations entry was brief and to the point: "Received news of Japan's surrender". Then began the work of packing up sensitive equipment ready for loading on the *Cape York*. On 12 December the 'top secret' facility was removed, allowing the Prom eventually to return to the peace-time role which Victorians had earlier designated for it, and which it still retains – a National Park to be used to protect nature and 'for public purposes'.

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## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> [As of 2008 the NPS is part of Parks Victoria and CNR  
has become the Department of Sustainability and  
Environment – Ed.]