

DONALD THOMSON'S REPORT ON THE NORTHERN TERRITORY COASTAL PATROL AND THE SPECIAL RECONNAISSANCE UNIT 1941-43

Edited by John Mulvaney

This extensive report is a difficult-to-read carbon copy of Squadron Leader Donald Thomson's official submission in April 1943. There are 71 pages of report and many appendices.¹

The report is repetitious, and the appendices frequently contain material already discussed. As the central concern of *Aboriginal History* is with Aboriginal people, I have edited the closely typed manuscript. Those sections which are reproduced include those which explain the background to this remarkable enterprise, or are necessary to the understanding of activities, and particularly all sections which refer to the participation of Aboriginal men and the one Torres Strait Islander enlisted man. I have indicated those sections where omissions were made, which sometimes are extensive. The final text has been reduced to fewer than 30,000 words from probably twice that length. Pagination in the original manuscript is provided in brackets at the beginning of relevant sections.

The text is reproduced as Thomson wrote it in 1943, so that errors in spelling personal names are retained. Fifty years ago terms such as 'half caste' were standard, while 'Aboriginal' was not capitalised. To preserve the true ethos of the times, they are reproduced as written.

It is significant that Thomson's participation in a scheme to organise Aboriginal warriors in the defence of the northern coast began in June 1941, five months before Japan bombed Pearl Harbour. It indicates military concern for the defence of the north and the expectation of a Japanese landing once hostilities commenced. Because the plan was implemented before the bombing of Darwin in February 1942, its background is reproduced here.

Donald F. Thomson (1901-1970) graduated in biology from the University of Melbourne in 1925, before studying anthropology under A.R. Radcliffe-Brown in the newly established department at the University of Sydney. He spent periods of anthropological fieldwork in Cape York between 1928 and 1932. In the latter year he became a research fellow (later senior research fellow) at Melbourne University. Except for his period of war service and a year in Britain, Thomson remained there until his retirement, by which time he held a personal chair.

During 1932-33 incidents occurred in eastern Arnhem Land involving Aborigines and Japanese pearl-livers. When some Japanese were killed by Aborigines, followed by three Europeans including a police constable, there were demands for drastic punitive action. That the Aboriginal people had justifiable grounds for their reaction was virtually ignored. In a travesty of justice, Judge Wells in Darwin sentenced three Caledon Bay men to long prison terms and sentenced Tukiar (Takiara, Tackiar, Dagiara) to death. Pressure from southern

¹ Archived at the Australian War Memorial as AWM54 741/5/9. The assistance is acknowledged of Mrs Dorita Thomson, who provided permission for the reproduction of Donald Thomson's photographs, most of them hitherto unpublished. Mr Michael O'Sullivan, Assistant Curator, Private Records, Australian War Memorial, provided varied support and information, which assisted considerably in deciphering a difficult text.

capitals resulted in the quashing of Tukiari's sentence by the High Court. He disappeared without trace once he was released, possibly a victim of police action.

It was in this tense situation that Thomson sought permission to enter Arnhem Land as a mediator. Between 1935 and 1937 Thomson traversed wide areas of north eastern Arnhem Land, and established close relations with the people. He made extensive ethnographic collections, documented diverse aspects of traditional social and economic life and took many superb photographs. Most importantly, he treated the people as normal humans and understood their problems in the face of Japanese and European inroads into their territory.

To assist comprehension of Thomson's narrative, it is necessary to explain another independent organisation. Thomson's small coastal patrol and Aboriginal unit paralleled another initiative, the formation of the North Australia Observer Unit (NAOU). This unit was largely the creation of [Professor] W.E.H. Stanner (1905-1981), who also graduated in anthropology from Radcliffe-Brown's Sydney department. When Thomson was in Arnhem Land during 1935, Stanner was amongst the Aboriginal people in the Daly River - Port Keats region. As a research officer on the staff of the Minister for the Army in early 1942, Stanner played a crucial role in suggesting the formation of a flexible land observer unit, to alert authorities of any Japanese landings. By May, when decisions were finalised, Major Stanner found himself in charge of recruiting 400 men. From September he commanded NAOU from its Katherine headquarters, which took over many of the functions of Thomson's command.

With the Japanese emergency waning, in October 1943 Stanner was promoted and transferred to General Blamey's staff. By that date Thomson's energies were directed towards activities in New Guinea coastal waters, until he was severely wounded in an attack by warriors in Dutch New Guinea.

On 11 June 1941, the then Flight Lieutenant Thomson delivered a lecture at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, on 'Arnhem Land and the Native Tribes who inhabit that area'. Top level officers from the three Services attended this lecture and saw his 'moving pictures'.² Tragically those priceless 20,000 feet of movie film, taken by Thomson in Arnhem Land during 1936-37, were destroyed in a fire in 1946.

The manner in which Thomson's lecture stimulated Lieutenant Colonel Scott, Director of Special Operations, to obtain Thomson's secondment to the army (with promotion to Squadron Leader), is clearly presented by Robert A. Hall.³ The document reproduced here supplements the account of Thomson's career, presented by Nicholas Peterson, in *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*.⁴ Peterson re-arranged and reproduced parts of Thomson's report in that study.⁵ Betty Meehan and Rhys Jones have made the most extensive use of the document, in their chapter 'The Arnhem salient', in Desmond Ball (ed.), *Aborigines in the defence of Australia*,⁶ reviewed elsewhere in this volume. Further information on army activities during the period of Thomson's patrol is contained in *Curtin's cowboys*.⁷ A list of abbreviations of military terms is provided at the end of this article.

2 Described by Thomson in AWM54 741/5/9, appendix 1:2.

3 *The black diggers*. 1989:85-98.

4 Melbourne, 1983.

5 *Ibid.* 113-39.

6 Sydney, 1991.

7 Walker, R. and Walker, H. *Curtin's cowboys: Australia's secret bush commandos*. Sydney, 1986. For the formation of NAOU:1-18.

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Introduction

[p1] In June 1941 I was sent by RAAF headquarters to observe and report upon the training of the Independent Companies which were then being formed at 7th Infantry Training Centre recently established on Wilson's Promontory. While at Foster I was borrowed by the General Staff, Army Headquarters, for discussions on the disposition of Independent Companies in the territories to the North of Australia.

During August 1941 I was sent by the DMO to the Northern Territory with the Director of Special Operations (Lt Col Scott, DSO) to discuss with the Commandant the disposition of Independent Companies and their employment on the flanks of the Darwin area. Subsequently I was seconded to Army Headquarters 'to be Officer Commanding Coastal Patrol and Reconnaissance for a period of six months' as from 15th September, 1941.

Following on the discussions which had taken place in Darwin and later at Army Headquarters, I was entrusted with the task of organising a coastal patrol in the Northern Territory. I was also entrusted with the task of obtaining and making arrangements for the purchase of a suitable vessel as well as the selection of special personnel for the undertaking. It was intended at first to organise a sea patrol to cover the flanks of the Darwin area and particularly the eastern flank, extending from the Clarence Straits along the northern and western shore lines of Arnhem Land - the coasts of the Arafura Sea and the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Islands such as the Crocodile Group and Wessel Island, off the coast. But later, after the purchase of the ship, and while she was being fitted out in Townsville, the scope was further enlarged to cover, in addition to the sea patrol, a land reconnaissance on both flanks. Accordingly, a second party in addition to the first, to operate on land on the western side of Darwin was then organised. After seeing the ship in the hands of the shipwrights in Townsville I left her in charge of Sergeant, later Lieut Palmer, and again proceeded to Darwin to confer with the Commandant and to take the Land Reconnaissance Party to the Victoria River area and to establish them there for the wet season of 1941-42.

The enterprise to inaugurate which I was originally seconded for a period of six months, has occupied some twenty months of close, intensive hard work. During this period, extended reconnaissance of both flanks of the Darwin lines of communication, as well as the hinterland and distant flanks, has been made, in preparation for the arrival of other flank forces, i.e. No 4 Independent Company, and later, the NAOU [North Australia Observer Unit].

The Special Reconnaissance Unit (now, April 1943, called the 'Northern Territory Coastal Reconnaissance Unit, RAE'), with the Auxiliary Ketch *Aroetta*, has been equipped to maintain armed reconnaissance patrols on the coast of Arnhem Land and the Gulf of Carpentaria. At the same time, native detachments were raised among fighting men of Arnhem Land, already well experienced in the killing of Japanese who landed in their territory, and these detachments were regularly trained for guerilla fighting and scouting and were fed and maintained to harass enemy landings in this area during the critical months of 1942.

[p2] This undertaking has now been completed, and a full report, covering the initial organisation, as well as the organisation in the field, with appreciations and other documents prepared chiefly by the Director Special Operations Section (Lt Col W.J.R. Scott, DSO) included as appendices to the main report, is presented herewith.

Organisation

Selection of ship and engine:

... it was decided by Army Headquarters ... that I should make an inspection of any ships in Australia which might be suitable and make a recommendation to AHQ. Ships of the type required - easily handled with a reasonably small crew, but big enough to carry a large amount of cargo, and if necessary, a detachment of troops, and at the same time fit to operate for extended periods in the open sea - were not easily obtained for many of the best small ships had already been taken over by the Navy, but I had in mind a large ketch which I had seen near Northern Territory Waters in 1936. This ship was newly built by Norman Wright of Brisbane, and had then only recently come off the slips. She was of exceptionally strong construction, built to sail and carried Bermuda or Marconi rig.

[p3] Corporal Palmer was sent in advance to Brisbane to endeavour to ascertain the present whereabouts of this ship from the builder, Messrs Norman Wright. It was learned that the *Aroetta* was then fishing between Gladstone and Townsville ... An inspection of this ship, and of several other vessels was made.... The purchase of the *Aroetta* was completed early in September and the 120 HP Ruston Hornsby engine was acquired by impressment....

Selection and training of personnel:

Even more important than the selection of the ship was the choice of suitable personnel for the special work to be carried out. It was essential firstly that they should be thoroughly experienced with small ships, for the inshore waters of Arnhem Land are shallow, with many shoals and reefs and still largely uncharted....

Secondly, it was necessary that the men selected should have experience of natives, a factor which proved later to be of first class importance. Above all, however, ranks the 'mental attitude'. The men must be temperamentally suited for life on a small boat, cramped and comfortless, and capable of standing up to long periods of exacting service under conditions that were monotonous, always exacting, and sometimes severe.

... I was asked to name twelve picked men from personal experience to serve with me. I knew of only two ... I had met recently while serving with the RAAF in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate.... Both had owned and operated small ships in tropical waters for years; they were accustomed to living alone for long periods, and both were thoroughly used to natives and had been earning their living as recruiters of native labour in the Solomon Islands. These two men were A.E. Palmer and T.H. Elkington. I had with them taken part in crocodile hunting expeditions at night in the Solomon Islands, and I knew at once that they were well suited to this special enterprise.

A.E. Palmer was at this time serving as a Corporal in the Field Security Police in Queensland; Elkington was still a civilian. Palmer and Elkington were approached by Army and asked to volunteer for special service on a hazardous enterprise. Both accepted immediately and they were enlisted in the AIF and sent as Corporals to 7th Infantry Training Centre at Foster, for special training in Small Arms and Demolition work there. On leaving Foster both men were promoted to the rank of Sergeant, and Palmer was subsequently commissioned.

A third white man was selected from the RAAF and seconded to Army to serve as WT [Wireless Transmission] operator on the *A.K. Aroetta*. This man was Sergeant K.R. Harvey, who had served with me in the first RAAF detachment at Tulagi, British Solomon Islands, and whom I knew therefore to be well fitted for this undertaking.

[p4] In view of the nature of the work and the difficulty of obtaining personnel at short notice with the qualifications as well as the ability to stand up to the rough conditions that

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could be expected, a strong recommendation was made that the remainder of the party should be comprised of natives who had served with me, or with Palmer and Elkington, chiefly from the Solomon Islands.

The shoreline of the Northern Territory is fringed with mud and mangroves; flies, mosquitoes and sand flies are troublesome and the climate is hot. Under these conditions life on a small ship is monotonous. From experience I knew that natives are generally more contented and are not under the same strain and restraint as most white men. They do not grouch or become 'bloody minded' and are more easily handled. One discontented man may upset the morale of a ship's company. As it later transpired conditions were exceptionally severe on the first patrol; the wireless operator served for 10 months without a break or relief 7 days a week; Sergeant Kapiu, Native of Badu, served continuously for 18 months without any leave.

The recommendation that a selected native crew should be used was adopted by Army and the reason for the employment of natives was stressed by the Director of Special Operations Section in his initial 'Appreciation' ... and arrangements made to obtain, through the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, and the Queensland Government, respectively, the natives who were selected.

In October, 1941, Sergeant Elkington was sent by Army to Tulagi, BSIP [British Solomon Islands Protectorate], to escort the natives, six in number, to Brisbane where they were enlisted in the Army before being despatched to Townsville to join the *Aroetta*.

One of these natives, Gege, a Melanesian from Choiseul Island in the Western Solomons, had been my personal boy during a long initial period of detachment in the Solomon Islands during 1940/41 and later was personal boy and cook at the RAAF AOB at Gavutu.

In addition to the Solomon Island Natives, one Torres Straits Islander who had served with me for a considerable period as Bosun on the ketch *St Nicholas* in Northern Territory waters was also selected. He was not only a fine seaman, experienced in sail, but knew the waters of the Arnhem Land coast well. He was also on good terms with the natives of Arnhem Land, and knew their language. Kapiu was enlisted in the Army, became Bosun of the *Aroetta* throughout the whole of the period of his service, and was finally made a full sergeant.

One additional native was specially enlisted. This was Raiwalla, a full-blooded aborigine from the Glyde River in Central Arnhem Land, who had been with me in this area and had proved his loyalty and faithfulness under severe conditions. Of the faithfulness, devotion to duty, and loyalty of these two men I shall have cause to tell later.

After completing the special course of training at Foster, Sergeant Palmer proceeded to Townsville, where he remained with the *Aroetta* while she was refitted, and Sergeant Elkington was sent to Tulagi to bring the Solomon Island crew to Australia.

All the members of the crew were known personally to us, and all were experienced seamen. As soon as they arrived in Townsville they were employed on the rigging and painting of the *Aroetta*. At the same time they were given regular instruction in rifle exercises and drill, as well as bayonet drill and musketry. They were also instructed on the Vickers ground guns, [which] were to be mounted on the ship for A.A. defence, and all received some firing practice on the range with Vickers MG [Machine Guns].

[p5] *Refitting of the Aroetta:*

Immediately after her purchase, the *Aroetta* was slipped in Townsville ... Substantial alterations were necessary to convert the ship into a patrol vessel. These alterations involved the removal of large refrigerating plant and auxiliary engine which occupied most

of the space amidships; the removal of the old Elwee diesel engine which was handed to the vendors; the provision of cargo holds (two) for the stowage of stores, arms and ammunition and equipment sufficient to serve for a cruise of six months ... the overhaul and repairs to running gear; the whole of the rigging; scraping and oiling of masts and spars and the chipping and painting of the hull and fittings, had to be carried out by the crew under the supervision of ... Palmer.

Land reconnaissance party

After the *Aroetta* had been purchased it was decided by Army Headquarters to organise a second party, in addition to the party on the Ship, to carry out a reconnaissance by land on the west flank of Darwin at least as far as Wyndham operating independently of the sea patrol but under the same command ... I was again requested to select personnel, this time however from the independent Company cadres already in training at Foster ... that this party should consist at first of one officer, to hold the rank of Captain (who was also to be Second-in-Command of the Northern Territory Reconnaissance Unit) and two sergeants.

On account of his experience in the mining fields of the north west of Western Australia WX10583 Lieutenant (later Captain) H.G. Morgan of No 4 Independent Company was chosen for this undertaking, and as he was to work to a large extent independently of the main party on the *Aroetta*, the choice of the two NCO's for this party was left to Captain Morgan. The two NCO's selected by Captain Morgan were:

NX 18128 A/Sgt Mazaraki A.E., No 4 Independent Company,

QX 20202 A/Sgt McDonald J.R., No 3 Independent Company.

It was further arranged that as soon as alterations to the *Aroetta* were sufficiently well in hand the OC Reconnaissance Party was to proceed again to Darwin and to meet the 2 i/c, Captain Morgan, there and to report to the Commandant before proceeding with the land party on a preliminary reconnaissance of the western flank of the Darwin area....

[p6] ... In the meantime, Sergeant T.H. Elkington had been sent to Tulagi ... to escort the Solomon Islanders ... who were being enlisted by special arrangement made with the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific at Fiji, through the Prime Minister's Department.

Arrangements were made by Army Headquarters with Air Board for the installation of the wireless equipment in the vessel to be carried out by RAAF Townsville ... Sergeant E.R. Harvey was seconded for duty on the ship ... It was arranged that all WT communications were to be carried out through RAAF channels, using RAAF codes to pass messages to Army.

By the beginning of November, 1941 work on the ketch *Aroetta* was well in hand. Sergeant Palmer was placed in charge of the ship in Townsville, and on November 7th I proceeded by flying boat to Darwin and reported to the Commandant 7 MD [Military District].... I was joined by Captain Morgan and the two sergeants, Mazaraki and McDonald

A conference was held with the Commandant, and instructions were issued for a reconnaissance by land, of the coastal area on the west flank, commencing at Katherine where in the meantime No 2 Independent Company had arrived in camp, and extending to Victoria River and thence across to Wyndham. It was arranged that I should proceed with Captain Morgan and party, travelling by MT [Motor Transport] via Katherine to Victoria River, with equipment and stores sufficient to carry this party through the approaching wet season and that I should then return alone to Darwin proceeding thence to Townsville to bring the *Aroetta* around by sea for work in the east flank. One Chevrolet 1 ton truck was made available for the transport of supplies and equipment ...

Establishment of Coastal Patrol and Special Reconnaissance Unit: proposed plan and itinerary (October 1941, February 1942)

[p7] It is understood that the objects are:

- (a) Reconnaissance.
 - (i) To carry out a thorough reconnaissance of the area, including islands off the coast, Borrooloola [*sic*] on the Macarthur River, Gulf of Carpentaria, to Wyndham in the north west of Western Australia.
 - (ii) To re-establish friendly relations with the natives of this area, which were established in 1935, 1936 and 1937; to assess the kind and degree of influence exerted upon the natives, especially in Arnhem Land, by the Japanese who have visited the area in numbers; to take active steps to dispel any Japanese influence and to undermine their prestige.
- (b) Flank Protection for Darwin.
 - (i) To provide flank protection for Darwin by organising the natives of this coastline to form an efficient coastwatching organisation, based on their own local organisation, and reporting, in each district, through posts equipped with WT.
 - (ii) To organise the natives into a potential mobile force or patrol, retaining for the most part their local grouping so that the natives can be readily gathered into efficient units to carry out guerilla warfare in the event of landing by enemy forces, and led by the reconnaissance party.
- (c) Instruction in Bush Craft [*sic*].

To gather together a small unit of the aborigines who possess special powers in hunting, in craftsmanship and bush craft, and who are skilled in guerilla warfare and ambush, and to use those natives for the instruction of members of the independent companies in tropical bushcraft [*sic*] and in living off the resources of the country.

Considerations:

The lateness of the season, and the rapid approach of the north west monsoon period, (from January to April) which is dangerous for small boats, make it inadvisable for any portion of the work on the west side of Darwin to be attempted by the sea during the present year. The reconnaissance party is therefore divided into two separate units, a land and a sea party.

[p8] The land party, consisting of Lieutenant Morgan and two Sergeants, which will operate on the west side of Darwin, will be ready to leave during October, and after a preliminary reconnaissance of the area ... will remain in this region for the ensuing wet season.

As the ... *Aroetta* ... will not reach Eastern Arnhem Land until about the middle of December when storms have already commenced and when most small vessels are laid up, it will be advisable for the vessel to be employed during January, February and March, on the Gulf of Carpentaria and on the coast of Western Arnhem Land where shelter and reasonably safe anchorages are available.

It is proposed, therefore, we make an initial visit to Darwin during December. For the purpose the vessel will proceed rapidly on the journey westwards, and leave the work of re-establishing contact with the natives, which must necessarily occupy many months and cannot be carried out to a timetable, to be carried out on the return journey from Darwin before the heavy storms of the north west have set in strongly.

On this eastward journey natives for the training work in connection with the Independent Company can be collected together and take[n] to the Roper River, where ...

the bushcraft training can be carried out most conveniently. The Roper River is navigable for a craft of the size of the *Aroetta* for a distance of about 80 miles, and a rendezvous could be arranged in the vicinity of the junction of the Wilton and Roper Rivers, or at Roper Bar Police Station, a little further upstream with a section of a platoon of the Independent Company. This locality would have the advantage that it is accessible from Katherine, the headquarters of the Company, and would also provide experience for members of the Independent Company in handling pack animals, which would, during the wet season provide the only suitable transport for this journey....

[p9] *Objectives:*

- 1 By building up the existing coastwatching organisation chiefly by intensive work among the natives of the area, so that regular reports, even if negative, will be received at Headquarters 7 MD from each area.
- 2 By conducting a thorough reconnaissance on the flank of Darwin to assist in detecting and reporting any enemy ships or aircraft, and by assessing the kind and the degree of influence exerted upon the natives by the Japanese ... by establishing such contact with the natives as to enable the prestige and influence of the Japanese to be undermined ...
- 3 [p10] By the organisation of reconnaissance and fighting patrols of natives whose hunting and fighting prowess is already well established, such patrols to be maintained and led as far as possible, by the Officer in charge of the reconnaissance party. It is considered that such patrols will prove of great value for night reconnaissance, guerilla warfare and ambush at night on the flank or behind the lines of an enemy landing force.
- 4 By establishing itself in this area behind and on the flanks of Darwin and acquiring such local knowledge as will be of value to the Intelligence Branch. It would also be possible to provide guides and scouts with local knowledge for any parties, which may work in the bush, or detached from the main forces.
- 5 By providing men to undertake sabotage or demolition work at points of enemy concentration or where landings were being attempted.... Under proper leadership it is believed that the small native force to be raised will prove capable of giving a good account of itself in surprise attacks at night and for actual fighting on a guerilla basis.

Plan:

... the *Aroetta* can best commence its work by proceeding Eastwards from Darwin to the Roper River area. The reasons for this are twofold:

- (a) The north west monsoon season, with heavy north west weather and possible cyclonic disturbances render the exposed area to the west of Darwin dangerous to the operation of small ships at the present time.
- (b) The natives, who are best known to me, and on whom I place great reliance, are in Arnhem Land. On the journey eastwards contact can be made with all these natives, efforts can be directed to undermining the influence and prestige of the Japanese in this area, and the nucleus of a native force for guerilla fighting and for scouting can be gathered together from among the natives who are well known to me, and whose language I speak.
- (c) On arrival at the Roper River, contact will have been made with a large number of the natives with whom the Japanese made determined efforts to establish friendly relations, and the nucleus of a fighting body referred to above can be gathered together by the time the Roper River has been reached.⁸

⁸ On Japanese influence, see below [p16] of Thomson's report.

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In order to hold these natives together and to make real use of their potentialities, it will be necessary to live and to travel with them. It is natives be taken up the Roper River as far as the junction of the Roper and Wilton Rivers by the ketch *Aroetta*, led overland up the valley of the Roper River to the Railway line and then across to the Valley of the Daly or the Victoria Rivers, wherever it may be decided by Headquarters 7 MD this party can operate to most advantage.

[p11] *Time:*

It is considered that a careful reconnaissance could be completed and these natives collected together in six or seven weeks, ie approximately by March 21st.

On disembarking the body of natives on the Roper River under the control of the OC Reconnaissance Party, it is proposed that the *Aroetta* in charge of Sgt A.E. Palmer proceed back to Darwin. At Darwin she could take aboard fresh supplies of stores and fuel, and proceed thence to the west flank, where she will meet or await the native detachment which will proceed overland.

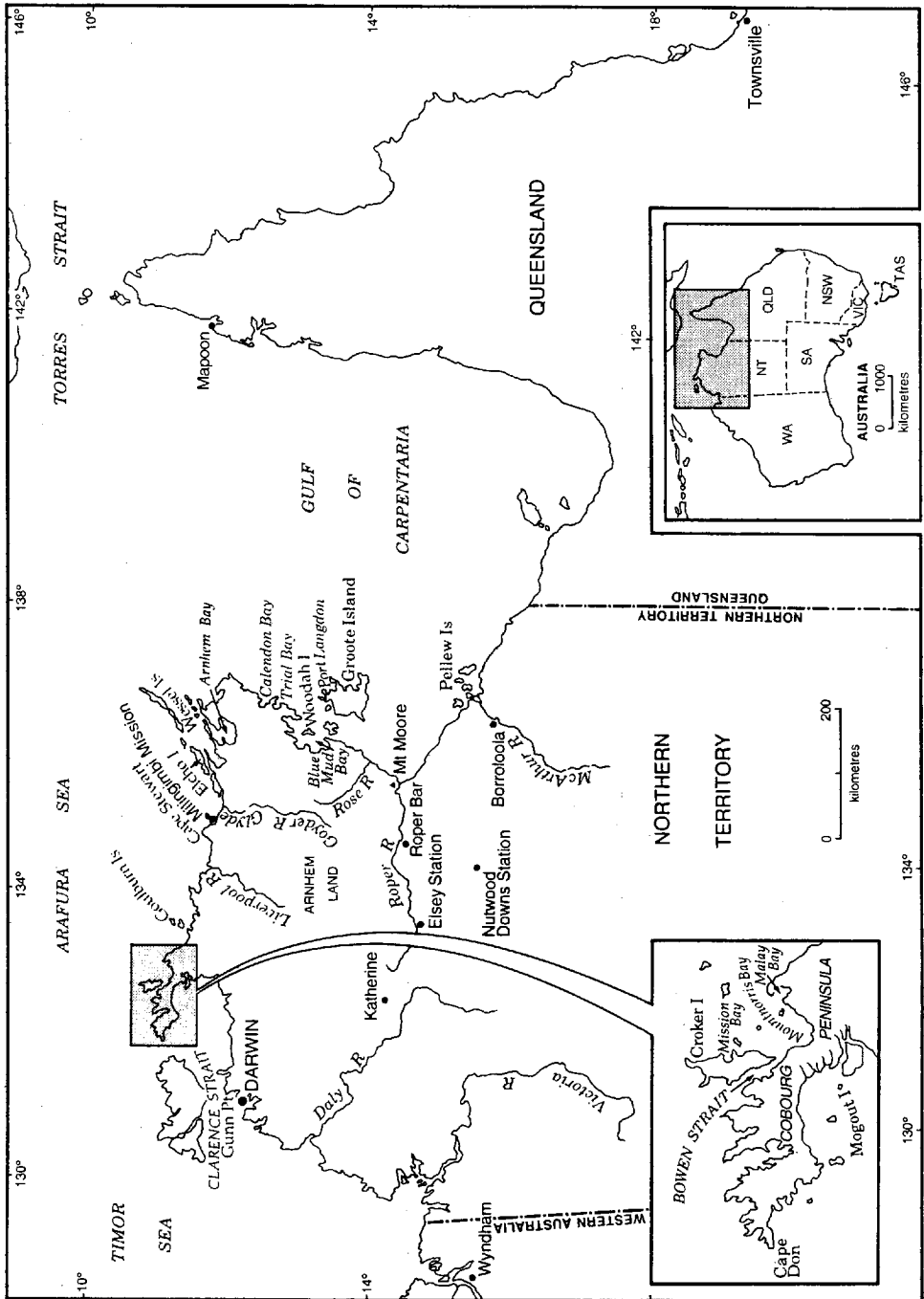
If this tentative plan be approved it is proposed to make one or more dumps of arms for emergency use some distance inland, in Eastern Arnhem Land, and to transport stores of weapons and ammunition required by the land force, by pack horses or mules to be acquired by hire or purchase, on the Roper River....

7 MD Operation Instruction No 13, 5 Apr 42

[p12] Ref Map: Northern Territory 30 Miles - 1 inch

Sqn Ldr: Thomson, OC 7 MD Special Recce Unit.

- 1 You will command:
 - (a) The Auxiliary ketch *Aroetta* and crew
 - (b) The party of natives raised by you and such additional native personnel as may be added to the party. This force will be known as the *Special Recce Unit*.
- 2 The role of this force will be:
 - (a) To undermine and forestall Japanese influence and maintain the present good relations established in Arnhem Land, the Roper River area, and the islands of the east coast from Sir E. Pellew Group to Elcho Is. ... and to prepare the Roper Area for reception of No 5 Coy.
 - (b) To harass enemy landings and progress in the event of landings on the East Coast.
 - (c) To obtain and pass information to Adv HQ, 7 MD.
 - (d) To order evacuation of civilians when considered necessary, and to assist in evacuation when the situation permits, from the area north of the Roper River.
 - (e) To organise a party for recce and contact with No 4 Independent Coy on the West Coast in order to prepare natives for a similar role.
- 3
 - (a) *A.K. Aroetta* will proceed to the East Coast under orders of Sqn Ldr Thomson to be used for coast and island patrol, and should the situation demand, the disposal of this vessel, will be as directed by Sqn Ldr Thomson.
 - (b) The Special Recce Unit will move as ordered by Sqn Ldr Thomson north of a line through Nutwood Downs and Sir E. Pellew Group.
 - (c) In view of the special assistance which can be rendered by this force to Ind Coys, close co-operation should be maintained with the No 5 Ind Coy and such with forces as may be sent to the Roper area, and with No 4 Coy working towards the East Coast.
- 4 Arrangements will be made for special rations, [tropical] equipment and ammunition for this force.



Map: Donald Thomson's Arnhem Land.

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Plate 1. The ketch *Aroetta* and crew off Dunk Island 1942/43 (Courtesy Mrs Dorita Thomson, National Museum of Victoria (NMV), Donald Thomson Coll).

- 5 Com[municatio]ns will be maintained with ADV HQ 7 MD through RAAF channels. In addition Army Channels, when established by Ind. Coys, will be made available for Special Recce Unit.

(Sgd) G.N. Nunn, Col,
General Staff 7 MD.

7 MD Operation [Instruction] No 15, 8 Apr 42

[p13] Major E. McD Walker, OC No 4 Ind Coy.

- 1 Your Coy will operate under Comd of 7 MD, and will cooperate with Sqn Ldr Thomson to ensure economy of force and communications.
- 2 The primary role of your Coy will be operational:
 - (a) To harass and disorganise enemy forces during and after landings, and to continue to fight in the area defined.
 - (b) To pass operational information direct to Adv HQ 7 MD.
Your secondary role will be intelligence and security.
- 3 Authorisations: You will be authorised to order and implement evacuation of local population, when considered necessary, from areas beyond 50 miles from the railway. You will also enrol, equip, train and use any VDC forces which can be raised.
You will be authorised to carry out demolitions, where considered necessary, after enemy landings, but this will exclude RAAF dromes or installations and all areas within 50 miles of the railway.
You will have authority to impress vehicles, boats, livestock and other materials from areas outside 20 miles from the railway.
You are authorised to frank messages to Adv HQ: priority 'immediate', but such franking to be limited to operational messages.
4. Base: Your Coy will be based on Katherine and disposed within the area allotted, so as to carry out your role and to cover the 3 rivers: Roper River, Daly River, Victoria River ... [Two pages omitted].

[Thomson's] Appreciation of the situation⁹

[p16] ... The situation in the North of Australia had changed considerably since the original discussions with the Commandant in August; there were reports of pro-Japanese activities along the Arnhem Land coast, in the Arafura Sea, and anxiety was felt about the position at the Roper River on the East Coast and the Daly and Victoria Rivers on the West, which were considered to be extremely vulnerable....

After being held up in Darwin for some days by cyclonic conditions the *Aroetta* sailed from Darwin on February 12th.... The preliminary reconnaissance carried out on the journey westward from Groote Eylandt to Darwin had only served to stress the vulnerability of this area, when in the whole of the voyage from Groote Eylandt to Darwin, a distance of some 6-700 miles, we had not sighted a ship, or once been challenged by an aircraft.

Probable enemy approaches:

It was not considered likely that the Japanese would land at any point on the coast of Arnhem Land or that there would be any advantage in this, but it was considered possible that we would have to meet: landings by aircraft; infiltrations by paratroops; or parties landed from small ships or submarines [which] might occupy the aerodromes at Milingimbi and Groote Eylandt. It was also considered possible that such parties, operating on a

⁹ Evidently this 'appreciation' was written in April 1943, so it was retrospective.

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commando basis, might land in the vicinity of the Alligator Rivers, the Roper River or the McArthur, and from these points, infiltrate the near flanks and lines of communication.

[p17] Further, in view of the very great interest that the Japanese had, to my knowledge and experience, evinced in this area during 1936 and 1937, and possibly even more recently, and their efforts to ingratiate themselves with the natives, it was considered possible that they might attempt to make use of the natives of Liverpool River and Cape Stewart areas (some of whom they had actually transported to Darwin on luggers in 1937), as pilots for craft approaching the rear flanks of Darwin. The natives are expert pilots in inshore waters, and have an infallible sense of direction even at night.

It was known that Japanese interest and contact had not been equal along the length of the Arnhem Land coast, but that the area of most intensive interest and contact with the natives was between Melville and Bathurst Islands north of Darwin, west as far as Cape Stewart. From Cape Stewart to the Wessel Islands including especially the islands of the Crocodile Group, and Elcho Island, the Japanese had also congregated; but while they made some contacts with the natives here, they had not met with the success that they had encountered to the west - at the King River, the Liverpool, the Blythe and at Cape Stewart itself.

Since 1932 they do not appear to have attempted to land in the area to the south of Cape Arnhem, for the fighting natives of Caledon and Blue Mud bays had always disliked the Japanese and had massacred many of the crews of visiting luggers, the last occasion being in 1932, when they attacked and killed most of the crews of two luggers at Caledon Bay.

During 1937 there were many Japanese vessels on this coast, and I had seen some 70 vessels at anchor and in sight at one time off Mooronga in the Crocodile Group. During an aerial reconnaissance of this area in a RAAF Seagull in May of that year, I obtained a series of official photographs of these fleets of vessels, and also boarded several of them. They carried about fifteen men each, so that there must have been about 1,000 Japanese in the area at that time. The crews of these vessels had gone to great lengths to ingratiate themselves with the natives and had given them presents of cloths, knives, axes, mirrors and tobacco, out of all proportion to the services rendered.¹⁰

These facts were reported fully at that time, but in the meantime no attempt had been made since I left the area in 1937, to make contact systematically with these nomadic seafaring tribes, and nothing had been done to undermine or minimise the effects of Japanese contacts with them....

[p18] It was evident, therefore, that in order to carry out effectively the undertaking with which I had been entrusted, a considerable amount of work would have to be carried out, especially between Van Diemen Gulf and Cape Stewart, to destroy Japanese influence among these natives with whom the Japanese had undoubtedly been able to establish a footing.

It was, therefore, necessary to allocate the time available in order to make thorough contact with these natives, who by reason of their comparative proximity to Darwin, had already much contact with trepang fishermen and in the past, with buffalo hunters and were therefore moderately civilised and sophisticated, in order to deny them to the enemy as aides or pilots, if landing should be attempted on the near flanks of Darwin.

At the same time their contacts with the Japanese rendered these natives less suitable for inclusion in a force intended for guerilla fighting and it was, therefore, planned to raise

¹⁰ Details in Thomson's *Report on Expedition to Arnhem Land 1936-37*. The Northern Territory of Australia, Commonwealth of Australia, 1939, No.337.

this force from among the people in Eastern Arnhem Land who were notoriously hostile to the Japanese, having already killed many of them, who were skilled in guerilla fighting and expert in ambush, and who still engaged in intermittent tribal warfare. Moreover I already knew these people well and had won their respect and allegiance, was thoroughly trusted by them and knew their language.

But important though the work to be carried out among the natives was, particularly in getting them as guides and pilots to the enemy vessels, there were other factors to be considered.

In any appreciation this fact stood out that there were three very vulnerable points in the area in which this Unit was to operate - Milingimbi, Groote Eylandt, and the Roper River. At Milingimbi and at Groote Eylandt there were 'A' class aerodromes, and at Groote Eylandt there was, in addition, a well equipped Flying Boat Base, with fuel tanks, fuelling facilities, ... [indecipherable] and tenders and an Aeradio [*sic*] Station. Groote Eylandt Flying Boat Base was quite undefended, and at each of the aerodromes there were two or three personnel rated as 'aerodrome guards'. In the state of our defences at that time and with the great lack of aircraft for the defence even of Darwin itself, it appeared that these advanced aerodromes were a liability rather than an asset of greater potential value to the enemy than to ourselves. Moreover as it was not possible to carry out regular searches by naval patrols of the Arafura Sea and the Gulf of Carpentaria, it was evident that enemy forces moving out to sea in the middle of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and making its final approach at night could reach the Roper River undetected....

Plan:

On this appreciation the following general plan was made:

- 1 After leaving Darwin the *Aroetta* would sail to the eastern side of Van Diemen Gulf.
- 2 On the eastward journey the first objective would be to locate the principal native groups in the area. Where possible, this work would be carried out by sea, but necessary land patrols would be made to ensure maximum contact with the natives.
- 3 It was considered particularly important to establish contact with the natives between Cape Don and Cape Stewart to enable the accurate assessment to be made of the extent of Japanese influence among the people and their present attitude, and to commence systematically to destroy this influence.
- 4 [p19] Although it was not considered advisable to recruit any substantial proportion of the native force among these natives ... it was intended to enlist two or three reliable men to carry them on the vessel and to train them for the work thoroughly so that if Japanese should land on the near flanks of Darwin, these natives would be available to act as guides, and to assist us in penetrating enemy occupied territory.
- 5 On the completion of this part of the programme, it was intended to enlist natives for the force required, from among groups east of Cape Stewart, over as wide an area as possible, and particularly in the Arnhem-Caledon Bay districts, selecting representative members of the groups in each area so that if a larger force should later be required, the natives already enlisted could be used to gather their own clansmen.
- 6 To reconnoitre carefully each probable point of enemy attack, and its hinterland, particularly the aerodromes at Milingimbi and Groote Eylandt; the Flying Boat Base at Groote, and the approaches to the Roper River. The recently recruited native force to be used for this work, in order that we should become sufficiently familiar with these areas to be able to penetrate them even under cover of darkness ... to carry out demolition and sabotage work. It was envisaged that if the enemy should occupy the aerodromes mentioned, it would be possible to lead a party composed chiefly of natives

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who themselves specialise in night attacks, to destroy aircraft on the ground, equipment and fuel depots, using Molotov cocktails, hand grenades....

- 7 To select ... suitable sites for depots in which stores and ammunition could be dispersed and concealed, so that in the event of the *Aroetta* being lost by enemy action, we would still possess sufficient reserve of equipment, arms and ammunition, including demolition materials, to be able to carry on a guerilla campaign indefinitely.

Narrative: The A.K. *Aroetta* on patrol, 1942-1943

Advantage was taken of the period spent in Darwin to learn as much as possible of the plans for the defence of the area and of the disposition of troops defending the lines of communication so that if an enemy landing should take place, (which at this period seemed not improbable), ...

The ship was loaded to capacity with fuel and stores, the latter sufficient for six months isolated service, not only for the crew of the vessel, but also for a small native force.... It must be borne in mind also that the situation at this time was such that it was quite probable that the vessel might not be able to return to Darwin for any further stores or ammunition. It was aimed therefore to secure sufficient stores and equipment to enable this flank force to hold out and continue to fight in the event of an enemy occupation of the area.

[p20] Although ammunition has been allotted initially up to the full scale for the number of weapons held, I had not felt justified in using any of this for necessary practice until I was assured of replacement. In Darwin we set out to obtain additional AA [Anti-Aircraft] protection and also sufficient ammunition to enable that practice to be carried out with all the weapons which gives men confidence in their fire power, and in their own ability to handle them, which is vital to the morale of a small, self contained Unit.

At the end of January and early in February, severe, almost cyclonic, storms swept the Darwin area, delaying the departure of the ship for some 10 days. This delay was used to full advantage however, and during this period we were able to obtain a twin Browning .50 calibre gun, and to have a mount made for this. We were able to obtain the services of United States armourer to mount the gun and to give instruction in stripping and maintenance.

We obtained, through the good offices of the Air Officer Commanding RAAF Darwin (Group Captain Scherger) 60,000 rounds of 'hang-fire' ammunition .303, which though it was condemned for synchronised aircraft guns, was of great value to this Unit, and for the first time we had sufficient ammunition for adequate practice.

The .50 calibre Browning gun had just come from Manila in a [Boeing] B17 that had been riddled with bullets. The gun was very foul and showed signs of its ordeal. We declined an offer to leave the guns to be stripped and cleaned, however, realising that at this time the chief consideration was to get them aboard the vessel and to see that they did not leave again under any pretext. For the remainder of our stay in port these guns were guarded jealously. The aircraft mounting was retained, and this adapted to a heavy mount on the top of the charthouse, where the best arc of fire could be obtained.

When the guns were mounted however, we found that we could obtain only 200 rounds. It was some months before .50 calibre ammunition was available in any quantity except for aircraft. As a special favour I obtained a further small quantity from the US Ordnance Officer and having exhausted all other avenues, made a requisition through the AAQMG (Lt Col Peters, DFC) at & MD Headquarters. Col Peters passed me to the Military Liaison Officer with US Forces, who in turn passed me to the Colonel in Command. The Colonel received my request for 2,000 rounds of link loaded AP [Armour



Plate 2. Aborigines and turtle eggs aboard *Aroetta* (Thomson Coll, NMV).

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Piercing] and tracer ammunition with the greatest courtesy, approved the issue of this amount and, to my dismay passed me to the same Ordnance Officer with whom I had been dealing previously, and to whom I was already indebted for all the ammunition obtained. This Officer received the request however without flinching, and parted with the 2,000 rounds as if we had never met before.

In Darwin we had one long air raid alert, and the members of the US Army Air Corps, with whom we met frequently, prophesied that the Japanese would be over in force at any time. By the end of the first week in February we were fully equipped, and the ship was loaded down to the copper line.... On February 12th we sailed from Darwin....

Before leaving Darwin we were warned by the Naval Examination Service that a Japanese mine field had been laid in Clarence Straits and that this area was closed to shipping. A look out was posted on the mainmast....

February 12th: The *Aroetta* anchored under the lee of South Vernon Island. A small double ended craft was then anchored in a bay to the southward and an examination was made of this ship. The vessel proved to be owned by a buffalo shooter named Black and had on board a party including Black and some of the lightkeepers from Cape Don Lighthouse, en route for Darwin.

[p21] A landing was made on the mainland opposite South Vernon Island and a report obtained from a white man resident there, of enemy mines which were said to be stranded well above high water mark in Shoal Bay, close to Gunn Point, was passed by WT to Headquarters, 7 MD on that date.

During the night of February 12th, a native sentry reported that a flying-boat had landed under one of the Vernon Islands. An aircraft, apparently a flying-boat, showing a single white light was subsequently observed flying in the general direction of Darwin, and this was also reported by WT.

It was considered advisable to break WT silence to enable these two reports to be transmitted, in view of the close proximity of the ship to Darwin.

February 14-15th: On Feb 14th moderately rough condition with a following sea were experienced in Van Diemen Gulf. The *Aroetta* entered a broad but comparatively shallow river to the eastward of Mogogout Island on the eastern side of Van Diemen Gulf. The leadline had to be used constantly as the inshore waters are uncharted.

A party consisting of the OC Reconnaissance party, and one aboriginal, Raiwalla, was landed here and commenced the work of making contact with natives who might have been in touch with Japanese pearl-ers in recent years. The *Aroetta* in charge of ... Palmer, then sailed for Mountnorris Bay via Dundas Strait where a rendezvous was arranged on 15th or 16th.

The objective of the shore party was to locate the camp of Mr Rueben Cooper, a half-caste aboriginal who was understood to have been operating a saw mill in this neighbourhood for some years and who has been in close contact with the natives of the Coburg [*sic*] Peninsula.¹¹

A course to the north east, towards the hinterland of Mountnorris Bay on the northern shore line was set, but during the whole journey which occupied two days, during February 14th and 15th no recent tracks or signs of occupation were noted.

The country between Van Diemen Gulf and Mountnorris is generally low and swampy The whole of this area was found to be completely depopulated and no evidence of recent occupation by natives was seen until the northern shoreline was reached. Native

¹¹ Reuben Cooper, son of R.J. Cooper and his Jwaidja wife Alice Rose, had a series of timber mills on the Cobourg Peninsula. He also introduced Australian Rules football to Darwin after his schooling in Adelaide ended in 1915.

foods, especially vegetable foods and yams were very abundant and it would have been easy to subsist on the country. Inland game was not plentiful, but fish was abundant on the northern shoreline and easily procured. It was later ascertained that Cooper's camp and sawmill is now to the westward of the course followed - about three miles inland from the eastern entrance to Bowen Straits, and also that the natives of this area are now all concentrated at Cooper's camp, the newly established Croker Island (Methodist) Mission for half-castes, which is situated at the head of a bay on the east side of Croker Island, and at Goulburn Island. This means however that they are the more sophisticated and more closely in touch with movements.

Mountnorris Bay was reached by the overland party about midday.... On February 16th, at 1015 hrs, the *Aroetta* anchored in this Bay. A heavy NW squall was encountered and an anchorage made on the east of Croker Island, a few hours later.

[p22] February 16th: ... a landing was located at which there was two huts and signs of recent occupation, at the eastern end of Bowen Strait. A motor car track leading away from this landing was followed inland for about two miles.... Heavy rains had just fallen and the area was inundated for miles. There was an excellent supply of permanent water in a running creek; (Apparently permanent). It was subsequently learned that the present camp and saw mill of Mr R. Cooper was situated about a mile inland from the point at which my party turned back.

February 17th: ... a visit was made to the Mission Station at Croker Island. There is an excellent harbour at the mission, with deep water to within 2 or 3 hundred yards of the beach. The white personnel then at the Island consisted of three men and four women. There were about eighty half-castes, including girls up to the age of 16 or 17 at the mission station. There was also a native camp on the beach at the anchorage.¹²

The WT set, which was employed for Naval coastwatching, as well as on private traffic, was unserviceable and Sergeant Harvey RAAF was sent ashore to examine the set, which he was able to repair, restoring communication with VID Darwin.

February 18th: ... the ship sailed for Malay Bay where I was anxious to examine the country thoroughly for any sign of recent occupation of Japanese, and also to make contact with any natives ... No signs of recent occupation by natives was noted, and it was afterwards learned that the entire area from Van Diemen Gulf to Goulburn Is is depopulated and the native population now gathered into the mission stations. Game was plentiful in the country surrounding Malay Bay and old tracks of water buffalo were noted, but no buffalo were met with either here or on the overland journey carried out on foot from Van Diemen Gulf to Mountnorris Bay. Game including fish, and native vegetable foods are abundant throughout this area of coastline fringing the Arafura Sea, and would undoubtedly support large bodies of men who were skilled in fieldcraft; but it is appreciated that there appears at present to be no valid reason why this country should be occupied by Japanese forces and the information is merely reported for record purposes.

February 19th: On the morning ... the OC Recce party, set off overland on foot to the northern shoreline, arranging a rendezvous with the *Aroetta* which proceeded ahead to an anchorage there.

¹² Shortly after this visit, the mission was evacuated following the Japanese bombing of Darwin on 19 February. Thomson later encountered the evacuees, see below, Thomson [p27]. During the fiftieth anniversary year, 1992, one of those evacuated children, Bob Randall, now Australian National University Aboriginal Liaison Officer, arranged for about sixty of the evacuees to revisit the site of the Croker Island Methodist Mission. On this episode, which saw 95 children transported to Thirroul, NSW, see Somerville, M. *They crossed a continent*. Methodist Overseas Mission, ND.

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February 20th: The vessel sailed from the anchorage at 0615 hours and anchored at South Goulburn Island the same day. Mr and Mrs Kentish, Methodist Missionaries, were still in residence at the Mission with their three children. It was learned that arrangements were being made by the Methodist Missionary Society and the Department of Native Affairs to evacuate Mrs Kentish and her children, but that [p23] Mr Kentish proposed to remain. It was stated by Mr Kentish that evacuation through Darwin was being arranged and that a vessel would be sent by Govt or Defence authorities from Darwin to move the mission personnel, possibly with the aid of the Mission vessel *Larrapan* [sic], from Milingimbi.

[Footnote added at bottom of p23: Mr Kentish was captured by the Japanese, and is now a prisoner. He was aboard the *Patricia Cam* when this vessel was sunk by a Japanese float plane near the Wessel Islands in Jan 1943. After the ship was sunk the float plane landed on the water and took Mr Kentish aboard the aircraft.¹³ It is reported that on the following day the Goulburn Island Station was machine gunned.

Note: The foregoing portion of the Narrative was written some time before the remainder of the report. In order to avoid unduly lengthening the narrative it will be necessary to curtail this considerably. The log of the vessel, covering the entire voyage, is however attached as an appendix to the report.]

A consultation was held by the OC Reconnaissance Party with Mr Kentish during this evening regarding his own role after the evacuation of Mrs Kentish. As Mr Kentish has been carrying out naval coast watching work, and as the proximity of the mission buildings with the conspicuous wireless aerials close to the landing ground rendered his station liable to attack by reconnaissance aircraft, Mr Kentish was advised to move his WT set some distance into the bush to a bark hut or other inconspicuous shelter where he could continue his work of reporting ships and aircraft with less risk of detection and interference. Mr Kentish undertook to adopt this suggestion. He also asked what assistance he could render to the country in the event of active enemy operations.

The importance of denying the natives to the enemy as guides and informants was impressed upon Mr Kentish, and the necessity of keeping in the closest possible contact with these people was also stressed. This was considered particularly important ... as they were closely associated with the Japanese in recent years, it is considered that they constitute a very real danger. It seems not impossible that if enemy landings should be contemplated on the near flanks of Darwin by enemy forces employing small boats, Japanese fishermen who manned luggers which formerly worked on this coast, might be employed by the enemy to collect natives with special local knowledge....

Mr Kentish expressed his willingness to carry on this 'propaganda' work, which I commenced and which I made my first objective along the entire coastline; but, as a missionary, he expressed doubt when it was suggested that he might also encourage the natives to harry landing parties and to kill them from ambush, an undertaking in which they excel. It is hoped that in the event of Japanese activities in this region, or of any sign of renewed Japanese interest, to visit the area in person or to detach a member of the party, with some of the enlisted native force so as to prevent active co-operation by the natives with the enemy.

[p24] The fact (which had not been made clear to the natives by the missionaries) that they were not at liberty to lend their services as guides, or to bestow their allegiance at will, was impressed upon them. They were given clearly to understand that any active

¹³ Rev. Leonard Kentish was captured at sea by the crew of a Japanese seaplane, after his boat was sunk. He was beheaded by his captors on 5 February 1943, in the Aru Islands.

assistance rendered to the enemy would inevitably result in their being themselves treated as enemies and it is anticipated that this will have a strong deterrent effect.

February 21st: ... the *Aroetta* sailed from Goulburn Island. No native camps were seen along the coast or in the vicinity of Rolling Bay and the vessel was therefore taken into the Liverpool River where there is a safe anchorage and abundant fresh water, to enable contact to be made with the natives of this area. The Liverpool River was a region of intensive Japanese contact from 1936 and 1937 onwards. Two reliable natives from this territory who were at Goulburn Island, were taken aboard the vessel there as crew, and with the aid of these natives contact was made with the people at the Liverpool River where there was a large camp.

A reconnaissance was made by motor launch for some distance up the Liverpool to determine the upper limit to which a small craft could be taken, and to survey the country generally along the river....

February 24th: ... the ship sailed east, passing Cape Stewart, to enter the Crocodile Islands during the same afternoon. A call was made at Milingimbi, and the vessel then taken up the Derby Creek where it was desired to establish contact with the natives of the camp from which Raiwalla, who had been enlisted in Darwin, had been taken on the journey west. On the afternoon of the following day I set out with the motor launch for Cape Stewart where it was especially desired to make contact with the natives, returning the following night. An important ceremony was about to take place there, and in consequence there was a very large gathering of the groups from the neighbouring territory.

Throughout this voyage eastwards, every effort was made to impress the natives with the armament and striking force of the ship, so that a greatly exaggerated idea of its size and armament would be spread among the people. The natives were shown the racks containing tiers of rifles in the main cabin, and whenever possible machine gun practice was carried out to impress them, particularly at night when the most effective use could be made of tracer ammunition.

The object of these demonstrations was to impress upon the natives the fact that the vessel was very much better equipped and more powerfully armed than the Japanese craft of a somewhat similar type as the *Aroetta*, which had been on this coast in large numbers. During this time valuable service was rendered by Raiwalla, whose loyalty never flagged and who carried on anti-Japanese propaganda in their language.

On leaving Derby Creek the vessel proceeded, via Milingimbi through the outlying Islands of the Crocodile Group, across Castlereagh Bay and thence into the Goyder River. In the meantime Raiwalla had been sent to carry out a patrol overland from Derby Creek to old Arafura Station site, thence across the Glyde River to muster the natives from that area at the mouth of the Goyder. Some natives were enlisted in the guerilla unit at Derby Creek, and additional members were attached from the groups which now accompanies Raiwalla on his overland journey.

[p25] A reconnaissance was made of Elcho Island, and the vessel taken through Cadell Straits, where a further reconnaissance on foot was carried out on the Napier Peninsula region west of Buckingham Bay. On March 4th the *Aroetta* sailed to an anchorage behind Hardy Island on the western side of Arnhem Bay. I was anxious to establish contact with a native of this area, Bindjarpuma, also known as 'Slippery', who was at this time the most powerful and aggressive man in this part of Arnhem Land, and who had for some years led the life of a predatory border chief, making periodical raids on his neighbours and then returning to the hills. At the same time, while searching for the man and his group, it was planned to employ the interval in unloading the heavy cargo from the ship, and to careen

her in a sheltered sandy corner under Hardy Island, to clean the copper. This work was carried out on March 5th and 6th, and the vessel refloated and loaded again.

Meanwhile, patrols were carried out in the neighbouring country and the native Bindjarpuma and his group located. A meeting was held with this man and his fighting band, and Bindjarpuma and most of the able bodied fighting young men of the group were enlisted. By the evening of the 7th of March, 36 picked men, all good travellers and hunters, some of them renowned as fighting men in single combat, had been collected. Only a nucleus was required to travel on the ship, and as I decided to limit the enlistment in the meantime as I wished to select a number from my old friends at Caledon Bay, no further natives were enlisted on the north coast. An account of the enlistment and organisation of the detachment being formed is set out in a section which follows.

The whole of the detachment was taken aboard the *Aroetta* on the afternoon of March 7th, and landed again that night on the south-east corner of the Bay. On the following morning I joined these men and set out with them on a patrol overland to Caledon Bay. After landing me here the *Aroetta* in charge of Sergeant ... Palmer, sailed for Caledon Bay where the vessel arrived the following day.

The distance overland between Arnhem Bay and Caledon Bay is little more than 40 miles, but the country is rough, with many rugged hills outcropping with rock, and some swamps and rivers. Most of the native detachment completed the journey by the following night, but some were unable to maintain the pace and came a day later.

Again no natives were found at Caledon Bay, and it was apparent that the group which belonged to the area must be farther to the south.

On March 12th the ship left Caledon Bay for Trial Bay, an uncharted [*sic*] bay a little to the south. The Caledon Bay group was located in the bush a little to the south west, and moved down to the sand beach close to the ship. Friendly relations which I had established years before with these fine, bold and warlike people were renewed, and we were inundated with offers from the men to join the detachment. As a nucleus only was required at this stage the number had to be limited. The men selected were especially fine specimens, all people who had grown up in an area where tribal feuds were still carried on, and where guerilla fighting still plays an important part in their lives. Many of these men were renowned warriors with almost legendary reputations for their prowess as spear fighters, and some of them had already killed Japanese.

[Footnote added at bottom of p25: In 1932-33 the natives of the Caledon-Blue Mud bay areas, besides killing most of the crews of two Japanese manned luggers, to which reference has already been made, also killed two white men, Traynor and Fagan at Woodah Island, and at the same place, in the same year, ambushed a party of the NT Police and killed one of their number (Constable McColl). All these parties were armed with firearms and were expecting attack, but the natives, using only their own spears, suffered no casualties.¹⁴]

[p26] It was possible to make only brief contacts with all these natives, for time was now short for the completion of the programme laid down, by March 21st. Wherever possible I went inland on foot, travelling and living with the natives, and re-establishing contacts. The allegiance of the natives of this area was never in doubt however, for the Japanese are almost hereditary enemies, and they needed little encouragement to begin preparing for the reception of possible landing parties, by forging their own 'shovel' spears from odds and ends of metal. Anything of iron, ranging from heavy oil drums and iron bars

14 This was the celebrated Tukiar trial before Mr Justice Wells.

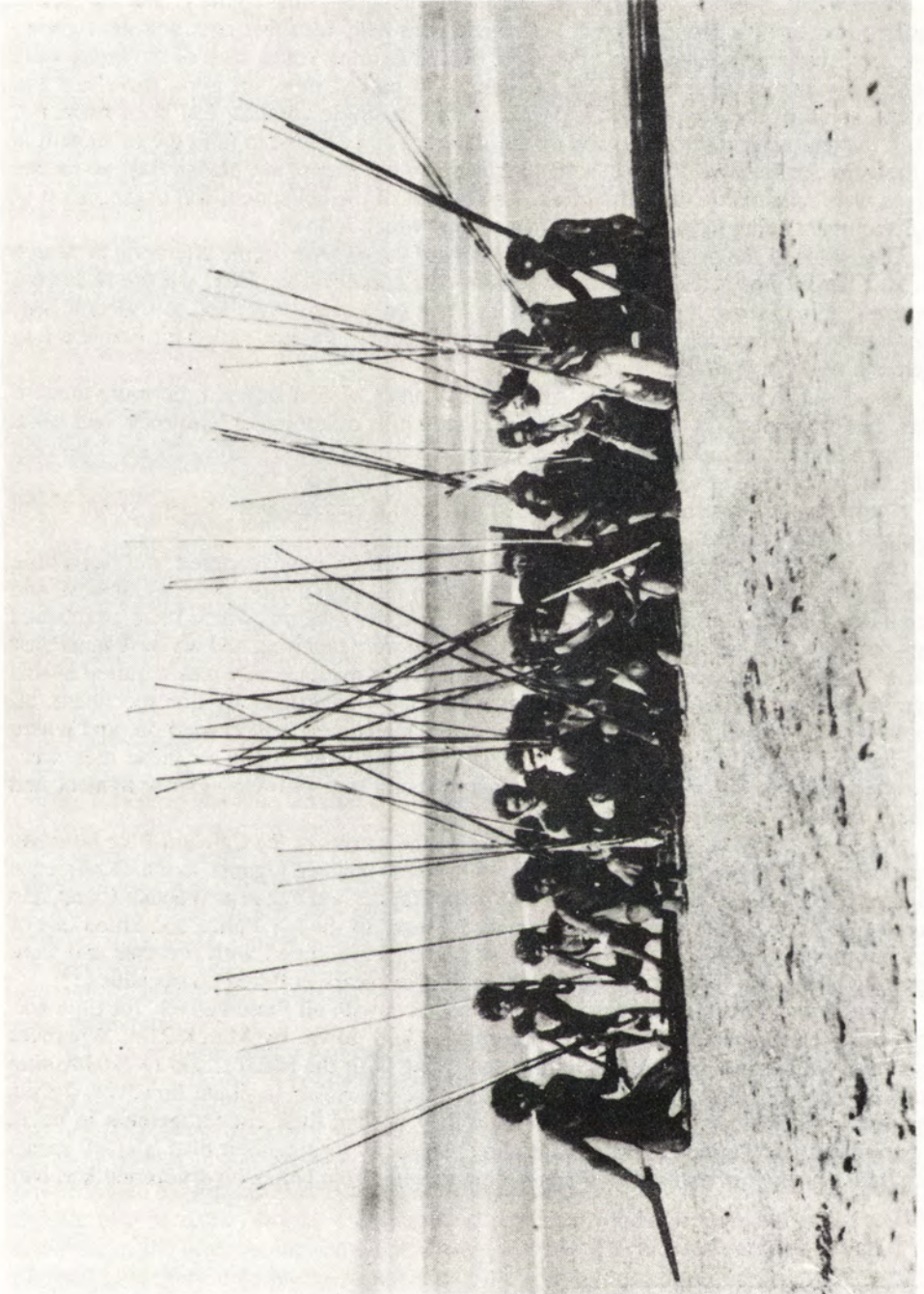


Plate 3. Law and order: *Makaraita* at Trial Bay, March 1942 (Thomson Coll, NMV).

to galvanised water pipes, and horse shoes are beaten out cold, and skilfully forged into spear heads.

On March 13th a signal was received from Headquarters with notification of Sgt Palmer's commission.

On March 14th we left Trial Bay for Groote Eylandt, anchoring off the Advanced Operational Base at the SW corner of the Island. The following day was spent in watering the vessel, and Lieut Palmer was sent overland by MT from the RAAF AOB to take delivery of safe hand mail from the Flying Boat Base. While the *Aroetta* lay at anchor off the AOB on March 16th, two multi-engined aircraft, apparently Japanese long range reconnaissance flying boats, flew low over the AOB and passed, one on each side of the *Aroetta*, at apparently 3,000 feet, without dropping a bomb or making any demonstration. It is assumed that these aircraft were engaged in photographic reconnaissance, particularly as this incident almost immediately preceded the raid on Katherine. We were handicapped in challenging the aircraft to ascertain definitely their identity, as the WT Operator was receiving a signal of 'immediate' priority while the aircraft passed over. In view of the priority of this message, and its possible relation to the aircraft then overhead, I deemed it advisable first to receive the incoming message and to decode it, rather than break off with the risk of losing contact, to permit the operator to use the Aldis Signalling Lamp.

A message was sent recalling Lieutenant Palmer, so that the ship could be moved from the vicinity without delay, as she was at that time carrying the whole of the equipment of the Unit, no suitable opportunity having yet occurred for its dispersal.

On March 17th we arrived off the mouth of the Roper River, and the following day proceeded upstream. Two boats were lowered when the ship arrived off the estuary, and most of the native detachment was then landed to avoid exposing all these men on deck in view of the presence of enemy A/C. Just when the two boats, fully loaded, were leaving the ship, a heavy bomber approached, but it proved to be a United States machine.

The mouth and approaches to the Roper River have changed considerably during recent years, and there is now a bar with little more than one fathom of water, nearly five miles out to sea, and a vessel, missing the narrow and unmarked passage, would probably be driven on to a bank, with the risk of breaking up, if a heavy squall arose from the weather quarter before she was refloated.

Progress upstream was slow, on account of the depth of the *Aroetta*. Fully loaded, the vessel was now drawing 8-9 feet, and owing to the 'drag' over shallow areas, she had to wait for the tide at several places. Meanwhile the native detachment was put ashore and carried out a thorough reconnaissance along the banks of the country fringing the river in preparation for possible future operations against an enemy using the river.... On March 19th, the *Aroetta* arrived at the ... Roper River Anglican Mission.... The natives, who had not tasted fresh meat for some time and who had been working hard on foot patrols, had been promised a bullock on arrival at the Roper River, and a steer was now obtained from the Mission, slaughtered, and handed over intact to the detachment.

[p27] Advantage was taken of this period in the Roper River to drill the crew again regularly and to take in hand the newly recruited detachment, which now numbered fifty fighting men and to get them into some shape. A parade was held each morning in order to instil the elements of discipline into those nomadic hunting people. Some account of the training of the native detachment will be given in section 8 which deals with the organisation of the native force.

The *MV Larrpan* [sic], which is normally stationed at Milingimbi ... and is employed in the transport of stores to the Methodist Missions on the North Coast, had arrived in the Roper River with evacuees from the Methodist Mission Stations. These people, the white

women, have [*sic*, half-] castes, and Figian [*sic*] women from the Missions of Croker, Goulburn and Milingimbi Islands, as well as from Yirrkala, were conveyed from Roper River to the Railway line by military transport which had come down to meet them.

From March 19 to March 23rd, the *Aroetta* remained at the Roper River Mission. In addition to the drilling of the crew and the native unit, a considerable amount of general reconnaissance was carried out on both banks of the River. An appreciation of the situation in the Roper River at this time revealed the fact that it was wide open to any enemy party which might come upstream. No watching organisation of any kind existed and there was not even a native camp for the first sixty or seventy miles from the mouth to give warning of an enemy landing or approach.

Arrangements were made with the missionary in charge (Mr Port) in the meantime, pending the setting up of a more permanent OP [Observation Post], to send a party down to watch the mouth of the river and to build a pyre on a high hill as a warning. Some weeks later, a permanent OP equipped with wireless, was established at Gulnare Bluff commanding a view of the mouth of the river and its approaches, in order to cover this very vulnerable area.

On March 23rd the *Aroetta* proceeded upstream to the Four Mile Landing, which is the limit of navigation for a vessel deeper than a dinghy.¹⁵... This landing is situated on the south bank of the River four miles from Leichardt [*sic*] Bar, at which the Roper Bar Police depot is situated.... Here we awaited the arrival of MT which was to transport the native detachment to Katherine as had been laid down in the Operation Instruction (No 1).

On March 27th, two 3-ton MT from No 4 Independent Company which had recently replaced No 2 Independent Coy at Katherine, arrived and on the 29th the detachment of 50 natives, together with arms and ammunition and equipment left for Katherine with OC Reconnaissance Party. On the same day the *Aroetta*, under Lieutenant Palmer, sailed down the river en route for Darwin, under orders from 7 MD Headquarters.

On night of March 30th, a camp was made with the native detachment on the Roper River at the Elsey Station, and contact again established with the Manager Mr Harold Giles, whom I had known for some years. Mr Giles was born in the Northern Territory and has had life long experience in this area.¹⁶ He is an expert bushman and knows the Territory terrain as few white men know it. Arrangements were made to enlist the co-operation of Mr Giles in the event of later operations in this area.

Furthermore, Elsey Station was so situated as to form a good depot for reserve of ammunition, and equipment for any small mobile force working on the Roper River, which might be unable to transport bulk stores farther down the river in times of heavy rains and floods.

[p28] On March 31st the party arrived in Katherine. In order to avoid the possibility of disorganising the natives, and to maintain discipline, which had been very good to date, it was considered advisable to establish a separate camp some distance from the regular camp area. A site was selected some two miles down stream on the banks of the Katherine River which, by arrangement with the Camp Commandant, was placed out of bounds to all the

15 Thomson omitted to mention his warlike night encounter with 'A' Company of Stanner's NAOU. When the *Aroetta* ignored warning signals when sailing up the Roper River, and failed to provide identification, it was fired upon and hit. Thomson was enraged, but Major Stanner wryly observed, 'Thomson had the idea that *he* and his men owned the sea and the river; this was nonsense, because *I* and my men owned the sea, the rivers *and* the land' Walker and Walker 1986:69.

16 Harold Giles, a former member of the Northern Territory Mounted Police and manager of Elsey station for over thirty years, was son of Alfred Giles (1846-1931), associated with Springvale and Bonrook stations in the Katherine-Pine Creek area.

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white troops in the area. No difficulty was experienced in keeping the natives within their own zone, but as their arrival had created some interest among the troops it was very difficult to enforce the prohibition. An undesirable feature was the fact that whereas the natives had been encouraged to carry, and maintain always, a certain number of spears, both for hunting and fighting [which], for reasons which will be apparent later, were to be their chief weapons in the event of guerilla operations against an enemy landing force, the white troops persistently endeavoured to induce the natives to trade these. This had not only left the men without proper arms, but once the edict had been issued, had to be enforced or discipline would have broken down.

A conference was held with Major Walker, OC No 4 Independent Company, and Lieutenant Burton of that Company who was about to leave with a section for the Roper River, in order to inform them fully of the situation on the Roper River and to pass to No 4 AIC the results of the recent reconnaissance there.

As information was to be obtained at Katherine as to the movement [*sic*] which we had just raised and which I had been instructed to bring to Katherine, and intended role of the native detachment, and as there had been changes in Command, I considered it advisable to proceed to Headquarters for a general discussion and for new orders. A request was therefore made for authority to leave the detachment at Katherine, and to proceed to Darwin by air. I was reluctant to be away from the natives for any length of time, as I was alone with them having no NCO to bring with me in view of the smallness of the Unit and the danger of undermanning the ship. I had promised these men when they enlisted that I would never desert them whatever befell, and did not wish to leave them now in a strange military camp, hundreds of miles from their own territory. Approval was granted to my request and on April 5th I proceeded to Darwin by Lockheed leaving Raiwalla in charge of the camp and detachment at Katherine.

At Advanced Headquarters I reported to Operations section and a conference was held with the GSO II (Major now Lieut-Col G.N. Nunn) and subsequently with the GOC (Major-General Herring) who then issued a new Operation Order (7 MD Operation Instruction No 13). This amplified and also greatly extended the scope of the previous order (7 MD Op Instruction No 1) under which we have been working since we had left Darwin. This new Operation Instruction laid down that the Force consisting of the crew of the *Aroetta* and the native unit already formed, together with any other native personnel who might be added to it, was to be known as the *Special Reconnaissance Unit*, and so definitely established this Unit as an independent command to operate on the distant flanks of the area, with a reconnaissance and fighting role. One of the functions of the Special Reconnaissance Unit was to pave the way for the Independent Companies and other flank forces, and to co-operate with these forces.

On the morning of April 7th I returned to Katherine, as I was anxious to see the natives as soon as possible. This visit to Force Headquarters had occupied only two days, but I left with a clear understanding of our role, and full appreciation of just what our tasks and responsibilities were.

[p29] We knew that we had the entire coastline from Cape Don to the McArthur River, as well as Groote Eylandt and the other islands off the coast, to watch, and to prepare against possible enemy landings - a coast line of more than 1000 miles. We knew also, for we had been told clearly, that we could expect no help. I can still recall now the feeling of pride that we all drew from this order and which told us to remain on the flanks and 'to harass enemy landings and progress in the event of landings on the east coast', and the determination that we felt that whatever befell us we would remain at our station. We did not overlook the fact that we were only four white men with a 43 ton ship. But we knew



Plate 4. NT Special Reconnaissance Unit on parade, 1942, with shovel-nosed spears. The Solomon Islander boat crew head each line (Thomson Coll, NMV).

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that if the enemy should land on this coast we were entrusted with a responsibility so great, and an opportunity to serve that might never again be given to so small a body of men. It gave us fresh encouragement in the task of raising the native unit and training these nomadic people. Hitherto we had heard nothing but disparagement of this native force. We knew now that our faith in the native force that we had been sent out to raise and which had been so laboriously built up and trained, was shared by the GOC and his Staff, and we returned with fresh heart to a task that had proved always exacting and difficult, and often disappointing.

I am proud to be able to tell now of the work carried out in the six months which followed by the handful of men, white and native, under my command, and to record the story of relentless unremitting hard work, unselfish service and initiative, displayed by these men working with one objective. In all that time not one of these men obtained, or asked for, any leave or relief, there was no grumbling or discontent, but every man in this unit carried out willingly and cheerfully what should have been the work of two men. Guards were maintained throughout every night; the men did armament as well as deck and other duties, they handled all the cargo; they fuelled the ship, often swimming out with the heavy drums of fuel; they watered the vessel, filling the tanks of the vessel with drums from wells that they dug ashore; they cut firewood, they careened the ship and cleaned the copper, and at the same time they were drilled, trained in the use of small arms and turned gradually into soldiers as well as sailors.

At one period, the Unit was divided into three detachments, operating hundreds of miles apart - one Sergeant ashore in charge of an OP; Lieutenant Palmer and the WT Operator on the *Aroetta* while I was away on reconnaissance with MT, operating between the Roper River and Borroloola on the McArthur.

Most of us expected that following the heavy raid on Darwin and the raid on Katherine, when reconnaissance aircraft were frequently sighted, that the enemy would make a landing somewhere on the east coast as Milingimbi, Groote Eylandt or the Roper River, and we set out at once to prepare for this.

It was obvious that any plan, to be of any real use must be carefully prepared and rehearsed and skilfully executed. My first objective therefore was to establish a good and effective OP equipped with WT commanding a view of the approaches to the Roper River which at this time was wide open, since early warning of the approach of an enemy would be vital to Headquarters. The fact was not overlooked that, important as might be the guerilla operations we might be able to carry on, the most vital role was the rapid passing of information of an enemy movement to HQ.

The next most important point was to disperse ammunition and equipment so that if the ship should be lost we would still possess arms and ammunition to carry on. Finally, it was necessary to establish and maintain an OP apart from that to be set up as the Roper is an area where the following conditions would be found:

- 1 [p30] The OP must be situated in sufficiently close proximity to the most vulnerable points - Milingimbi, Groote Eylandt, and the Roper River - to enable raids to be carried out at night with natives to destroy enemy aircraft on the ground and to sabotage fuel dumps and equipment.
- 2 It must be situated in an area where the natives were well disposed and absolutely to be relied on in the event of an enemy landing, and where in the meantime regular contacts could be maintained with the natives to prepare them for the role they were to play, and to enable them to be mustered at the first warning of enemy approach.

- 3 Though located close to a likely point of enemy attack, the OP should, if possible, be situated at point not likely itself to be attractive to the enemy, and therefore one at which they were unlikely to land.

Before leaving Darwin on return to the east coast, where the *Aroetta* was to meet me at the Four Mile Landing near Roper Bar, arrangements were made to replenish all stores on the *Aroetta* to enable the vessel to remain for six months without further supplies except of fuel, and plans had been made to lay down a fuel depot at Groote Eylandt so that the ship need not leave her station at a critical time to refuel.

In view of the plan to attack enemy aircraft on the ground, certain special stores had to be obtained. The vessel was already well equipped with demolition materials, but materials for the making of Molotov cocktails were inadequate. For this purpose a drum of bitumen was obtained in Darwin and a raid then conducted on all the hotels which remained after the first air raid to secure as many clear glass bottles as possible since these are the most suitable for this work. From these forays, conducted independently, the crew returned each with a sack of empty bottles on his back. Every man put his heart into the acquisition of equipment for the task ahead with a zeal that would not be denied.

Narrative: (ii) Return to Roper River: establishment of depots and OP

On return to Katherine, arrangements were made to transport the native detachment of 50 men back to the Roper River. A convoy of two 3-ton trucks was made available and in addition a 30-cwt vehicle was taken on charge by the Special Reconnaissance Unit for land transport in the Roper-McArthur areas where necessary.

It was considered imperative that the OP which I intended to establish at the mouth of the Roper River should be equipped with wireless. It had not been possible to obtain the necessary equipment at Headquarters at this time, as there was a heavy call for WT transmitters and equipment had already been issued. A WT set was therefore impressed from Roper Valley Station for this OP.

On route from Katherine to the Leichardt Bar, Roper River, a depot was laid down at Elsie [*sic*] Station, containing a reserve of SA [small arms] ammunition and rations. A second depot was established at the Roper Bar Police Depot, containing further reserves of ammunition and in this depot which was considered reasonably safe, certain weapons, including a Bren, LMG, and a number of TSMGs rifles and ammunition, were laid down. As Roper Bar was at the end of the Road up to the L of O [*sic*], the motor vehicle and fuel supplies were also laid down at this point. In establishing a reserve store of arms and leaving the MT here, consideration was given to the fact that headquarters of a Platoon from No 4 Independent Company, was being set up at Roper Bar Police Depot. Subsequently, a small cache of two cases of SAA ball ammunition was secreted in the rocks on a hill overlooking the river close to the Four Mile Landing, which could be reached overnight in extreme emergency even if the area should be strongly held by an enemy force.

[p31] On April 15th the *Aroetta* arrived on return from Darwin, and on the following day the whole of the native detachment was taken aboard the vessel and proceeded downstream to the Roper River Mission. Natives were landed on the north bank, under Pte Raiwalla, to make a foot reconnaissance of the north bank of the stream between the ... Mission and of the mouth of the River.... On April 22nd the vessel was anchored at No 1 Survey Camp close to the mouth of the river and intensive reconnaissance work carried [out].

A local patrol was carried out on foot by Lieutenant Palmer, with a detail of natives, to the south of the mouth of the river.... As no high ground exists in this vicinity and as no water could be found even in native wells at this time, the vessel proceeded upstream to

Gulnare Bluff (Mt Moore) where a further reconnaissance was made to determine the suitability of this site for an OP, for I was anxious to select a site and set up this post for observation without loss of time.

The fact that Gulnare Bluff (Mt Moore) was situated only six miles from the mouth of the river, and that it commanded a view over the estuary of the river and also covered the mouth and approaches, made it eminently suitable as a site for an OP. But no water was found at this time, other than surface water. It was decided, however, that the OP must be established and a search for water conducted while this work was in progress.¹⁷

Narrative: (iii) Reconnaissance on foot northward to Rose River

Instructions had meanwhile been received from Headquarters for a reconnaissance to be carried out for a distance of 40 miles to the north of the Roper River Mouth to search for possible enemy fuel depots and landing areas.

I decided to carry out this patrol on foot while the OP was being prepared. A party was selected from the native detachment and leaving Lieutenant Palmer in charge of the ship, I proceeded north of the Rose River. The area was extremely arid and on the forty mile patrol to the Rose River only two wells were found. These had to be cleaned out and deepened and even then provided very little water. On the afternoon of the second day we arrived at the estuary of the Rose River after a long hard stage - only to find that the only native well was dry, and after we had therefore to retrace our steps at once to the well where we had last obtained water....

[p32] Work on the OP had meanwhile progressed well and in order to camouflage the site to the best effect, the camp was partially excavated in the ground among the rocks. It was then roofed with galvanised iron obtained from an abandoned camp near the mouth of the river, and this was then camouflaged with boughs so that it was almost impossible to detect from the air. Some difficulty was experienced first in inducing the natives to approach the post in such a way that tracks would not be worn leading direct from the river to the site.

As the search for water in the area had proved fruitless, this had to be supplied in the meantime from the ship, until tanks could be obtained to hold a supply adequate for the needs of the OP.

By 28th April the work was completed; the WT set installed ... and satisfactory tests had been carried out. An 'Iron Horse' charging motor ... was provided, for the charging of batteries. Sergeant Elkington, who was the only one of the white personnel who could be detached, was placed in charge of the OP with a detachment of twelve picked natives from the detachment of 50, headed by their own section leader, Binjarpuma or 'Slippers'... Sergeant Elkington ... remained in charge for two months (until July 5th) when the post was handed over to No 4 Independent Company....

On May 1st the *Aroetta* again proceeded up stream to carry water for the OP. Two 400 gallon heavy galvanised tanks were secured from Roper Bar, and these were subsequently installed at Gulnare Bluff. Both the tanks had been filled with water up stream, but the additional weight had increased the draught of the vessel sufficiently to prevent the ship from crossing some of the sand bars except on a very full tide, and one of the tanks eventually slipped overboard. The tank was retrieved, but only four hundred gallons of water remained and the second tank had to be filled laboriously with surface water scooped from the shallow pools that still remained on the surrounding plains.

¹⁷ Gulnare Bluff on Mt Moore, an isolated hill less than 50m high surrounded by mudflats, offered excellent panoramic views. After the army took over the post, drinking water was transported from Darwin. Walker and Walker 1986:69, 79.

As much difficulty was being experienced in securing a propellor of the same pitch and diameter as the one now on the ship which had been damaged, I at length obtained authority to send Lieutenant Palmer by Flying Boat from Groote Eylandt to Brisbane to assure [*sic*] that the replacement would be of the right diameter and pitch and tapered to fit the shaft. On May 23rd the *Aroetta* arrived at the Flying Boat Base and anchored in Little Lagoon. While awaiting the arrival of the flying boat on which Lieutenant Palmer was to proceed to Brisbane, we put the stern of the *Aroetta* up for examination of the propellor and to obtain correct specifications for the replacement. Now that I was assured of obtaining another propellor I decided to take the risk of beating out the damaged blades of the propellor in the hope that, pending replacement, this would increase its efficiency at least a little. Working in four feet of water, we were able to bend the blades out with heavy hammers and to remove the rough edges with files.

On May 26th Lieutenant Palmer left by Flying Boat, and I employed the period of his absence in patrols of Bennet Bay, Blue Mud Bay and the Caledon Bay areas, in order to maintain the closest possible contact with these natives.

The *Aroetta* left Groote Eylandt for Blue Mud Bay, on May 27th, anchoring in Bennet Bay, near Cape Barrow. The ship was now much under manned, as I had with me only the WT Operator in addition to the natives. Sergeant Elkington, who had served as engineer, was at Gulnare Bluff OP and the native who had acted as assistant, Pte E. Richardson, had been sent to Katherine Hospital and later invalided out of the Unit.

[p33] During the ensuing week the *Aroetta* worked along the shoreline of Blue Mud Bay, calling also at Woodah and Round Hill Islands, and at various points of the mainland. This is a dangerous shoreline for vessels drawing much water; it is shallow and uncharted with many banks and reefs, the more dangerous because the water is always dirty and discoloured. In the SE season the sea rolls straight into the wide, open, shallow bay. Throughout almost the whole of the period in which the *Aroetta* was cruising in this area the engine had to be run at greatly reduced speed and the lead line used constantly to feel the way.

At each anchorage, detachments of natives were sent ashore to reconnoitre and to examine the area for signs of recent occupation by strangers or by native hunting parties with whom it was desired to establish contact. A report had been received from HQ that an RAAF *Gannet* Aircraft was reported to be missing over Arnhem Land. Sgt Elkington was instructed by WT to send out patrols in his territory, and an extended search was carried out by natives from the *Aroetta* at each anchorage without result. On June 2nd a detachment in charge of Raiwalla was put ashore west of Woodah Island and instructed to carry out a patrol north of Blue Mud Bay to Trial Bay, and to meet with the ship there. On June 4th I took the *Aroetta* out of Blue Mud Bay and sailed north along the coast, anchoring in Trial Bay, where Raiwalla arrived with his detachment on the following night, after a severe journey in very rough country.

Many natives were living here and it was at this time the chief camp of the people whose territories extended over a long stretch of coastline. Contact was made with Wongo, headman of the Caledon Bay people at Trial Bay. Except for reports of aircraft sighted, these natives had little to report, and no signs of strange ships or if Japanese activities had occurred in our absence.

A number of natives from the detachment had been recruited in this area, who had tired of the routine work, and gone AWL and these men arrived back in their home camp while the *Aroetta* was anchored in Trial Bay. They readily rejoined the vessel however, and all served for a further period on an extended reconnaissance on the Roper and McArthur Rivers....

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I remained in Trial Bay with these natives for more than a week ... working hard with these people from amongst whom we had already recruited many men. The value of an OP in close proximity to Groote Eylandt and the approach to the Roper River, was stressed earlier in this report, and I had already planned to establish this base ... among the Caledon Bay people.... These people offered just what was required; they were so notoriously hostile to the Japanese fishermen in recent years, that it was unlikely that the Japanese would select their territory, as a landing point for small parties, even if it had otherwise any advantage. They were warlike, and numerically strong, and as I myself was on very friendly terms with them and spoke their language, their territory would afford an excellent base. But being high spirited and independent, they were not easy to handle, and discipline came hard to them, as it does to most natives.

On June 13th, I took aboard the whole of the detachment again and sailed south to Groote Eylandt.... The ship proceeded thence to Port Langdon to pick up Lieutenant Palmer who returned on June 21st ... [and] brought a new propellor and shaft.... The straightening out of the blades ... had proved so satisfactory that it was now possible to run the engine at the full normal speed of 1000 revolutions without excessive vibration, and as it was now considered advisable to slip the vessel before the end of the year, the damaged propellor was not removed ... instead the replacement was held in reserve....

[p.34] On June 29th the *Aroetta* anchored off the OP at Gulnare Bluff. Sgt Elkington had nothing of importance to report. Both he, and all the members of the detachment, were in good health and spirits, but they were suffering severely with the mosquitoes which were present in great numbers, and came out in hordes at night, and during the day were much troubled by flies. Conditions at the OP were severe and extremely monotonous. The surrounding country was flat and uninteresting, consisting merely of miles of salt pans and plains intersected with mangroves. Nevertheless Sgt Elkington and the detachment of natives had carried on their work at this OP maintaining a constant lookout, keeping regular schedule with the ship each day, and carrying out patrols in the surrounding country....

In the meantime arrangements had been made to hand over ... to No 4 Independent Company, which was now in a position to supply the necessary personnel to take over the whole of the Roper River area and so to free the *Aroetta* for patrol work farther out on the flanks.¹⁸

It had now been arranged that I was again to visit Force Headquarters to report. As this Unit was responsible for reconnaissance of the area as far south as Pellew Group and the McArthur River, and the territory generally north of Nutwood Downs, it was considered most economical to send the *Aroetta* after landing me at Roper Bar to carry out reconnaissance of Maria Island, the Pellew Group, and the McArthur River. It was planned that I should then proceed overland on the return from Darwin, to make an extended reconnaissance by land, meeting the *Aroetta* at Borrooloola on the McArthur River.

On June 29th the ship was again taken upstream to the 4 Mile Landing near Roper Bay, the whole of the cargo was removed to enable a general check to be made, and to clean out the holds. Meanwhile the depot which had been maintained at Roper Bar Police Depot was withdrawn, including the arms and ammunition, and loaded on the vessel. While this was in progress, the crew was sent ashore regularly to drill and for bayonet exercises, a routine which had been suspended while the ship was at sea on patrol.

¹⁸ When troops of NAOU controlled Gulnare outpost, it 'topped the list of "worst outposts". The abundance of insects, heat and mud, and the shortage of water ...'. It had to be abandoned during the 1942-43 wet season Walker and Walker 1986:69, 80. No 4 Independent Company was a unit of NAOU.

Arrangements were made with Captain Thompson of No 4 Independent Company to proceed down the river on the *Aroetta* and to take over the OP. This post was handed over on July 5th when Sergeant Elkington, together with the detachment of 12 natives, rejoined the ship and resumed duty as engineer. Lieutenant Palmer then proceeded with the *Aroetta* via Maria Island to the Sir Edward Pellew Group and the McArthur River, carrying out the work laid down in Operation Order No 4.

Meanwhile, on July 4th I left Roper Bay by MT with a detachment of six natives - one Solomon Island member of the crew and five other natives, for Force Headquarters.

At Force Headquarters a discussion was held on the future role and identity of the Special Reconnaissance Unit, and as a result an application was made at this time for a definite establishment for the Unit, and for a separate colour patch. It was felt that such establishment and definite identity would assist in holding together this force and that it would further serve to foster a pride in the Unit and build up a solidarity which is essential in the success of any organisation of men however small.

[p35] Approval was given for the *Aroetta* immediately upon completion of the programme upon which the vessel was now engaged to proceed to Townsville to be slipped and refitted, in order that the ship could return to her station before the onset of the next wet season (December to March).

On July 9th, I set out on return to Katherine, where stores were obtained for the vessel and for the native detachment of 50 men working with the ship. On the following day I proceeded by MT at Mataranka and confirmed the arrangement made at HQ for the 30 cwt vehicle now on charge to be exchanged for a three ton GS wagon with front wheeled drive for the overland journey. I arranged for this vehicle to be taken out to Elsey Station with a load of stores and handed over to me there.

The stores which had been left in the depot at Elsey Station were resorted and the 3 ton vehicle loaded for the journey to the McArthur River, about 300 miles away.... It was decided to put a full load on the three ton vehicle to demonstrate the extent to which territory could be transversed by heavily laden AFVs, which might without any difficulty at this time have been landed on the coast between the Roper and the McArthur Rivers.

The country throughout was rugged, some of the hills outcropping with stone, and it was intersected with watercourses. Rapid progress was made to Hodgson Downs, but just after leaving the Station a mechanical breakdown occurred which involved a total delay of some ten days. When this had been finally rectified the journey to Borroloola was resumed and was completed in three days with a vehicle deliberately overloaded and driven by one who was not a motor transport driver, for no driver was carried on the strength of the Unit. My only companions on this journey were the six natives who had accompanied me from the *Aroetta*. The vulnerability of this low lying area on the east flank, and the ease with which it could have been used by sea borne MT was therefore further demonstrated.

On July 25th I rejoined the party on the *Aroetta*. In the meantime Lieutenant Palmer had completed a careful reconnaissance of the lower reaches of the McArthur River....

On July 29th the *Aroetta* sailed from the McArthur River for the Pellew Group, where the vessel was anchored under Vanderlin Island and a further short reconnaissance carried out. On July 31st the ship sailed again for Groote Eylandt. On the following day I landed at Groote Eylandt, with a detachment of natives and established a temporary camp, with certain of the equipment, sending the *Aroetta* back to Maria Island, off the mouth of the Roper River, to pick up a detachment of natives who had been put ashore there some time previously. On August 3rd the vessel returned with this detachment to Groote.



Plate 5. Detachment of Aboriginal Special Reconnaissance Unit in camp at Katherine, April 1942, wearing identification tags (Thomson Coll, NMV).

Narrative: (iv) Return of native detachments and final patrol

The completion of the reconnaissance of the coastal area, and of the Roper and McArthur Rivers and the handing over of the OP [at] the mouth of the Roper River marked the end of the first phase of the undertaking with which this Unit had been entrusted.

Simultaneously with the reconnaissance of this area, the nucleus of the native Unit had been thoroughly and systematically trained.... Most of them had now been away from their own territories and their women folk for several months, and it was considered that no useful purpose would be served by keeping them longer with the vessel, but that they [p36] should be repatriated and rewarded with gifts in return for the faithful services that they had given. It was intended that these men, generally representative and influential members of their groups, would form the nucleus of an efficient coast watching system and that by making regular contacts with them on each subsequent patrol they would be available when called upon, to muster their own clansmen in the event of enemy action in the area.

It was considered, therefore, that the most important undertaking that remained to be carried out was the establishment of a permanent OP ... to serve as a base from which to conduct patrols or sorties, and particularly to serve as a permanent rendezvous where contacts would be maintained with the natives. It was further planned that once the nucleus had been trained, instead of attempting to maintain a large force which must grow 'stale' with inactivity, a few representative members only of each group should be held at the OP. These men could be ready to collect their groups together if required. Meanwhile the others would be encouraged to continue to lead their normal existence as nomadic hunters. In this way it was considered that the most effective use could be made of these people, and their morale maintained at a high level.

... Caledon Bay was finally selected as the site for the OP and on August 4th the *Aroetta* again in the area known as 'Gray's Camp', at the head of the arm or Bay to the east of Middle Point in Caledon Bay.¹⁹ The whole of the native force was landed here and a site selected for a house and garden - the house to be built of stringy bark. Good water was found in shallow wells close to the beach.

Some 15 days, from August 4 to 20th, were devoted to the establishment of the OP including the building of a house and garden....

As soon as the work ... had been completed the *Aroetta* proceeded on a final patrol around Cape Arnhem into the Arafura Sea west as far as the Liverpool River. Visits were made to the outlying islands, including Wessell Island, Elcho Island, and the Crocodile Group [Milingimbi], and the natives who had been recruited for the special force were repatriated and rewarded with presents of knives, tomahawks and tobacco....

... On September 19th Sergeant Elkington was placed in charge of the OP at Caledon Bay and the *Aroetta* proceeded to Groote Eylandt en route for Townsville to refit.

At Groote Eylandt in response to reports from RAAF personnel who had reported strange lights an extended search was conducted, covering three sides of the Island with nil results. The dates on which these lights were reported coincided with those on which electrical storms were observed.

On September 23rd a course was set for Pera Head on Cape York Peninsula, a landfall was made on September 25th and in the afternoon of that day the ship anchored at Mapoon in Port Musgrave.

[p37] At Mapoon reports were brought in of a B17 of the US Air Corps which had recently crashed, and under orders from NE AREA RAAF the ship remained at Mapoon for

¹⁹ Fred Gray during the 1930s worked as a trepanger around Caledon Bay and Groote Eylandt, selling his harvest at Thursday Island.

several days while a search was conducted for a missing member of the crew, without result. On September 30 the voyage was resumed.... On October 15th the *Aroetta* arrived in Townsville after an absence of nearly ten months on patrol.

Medical work among natives

As no medical officer was carried on account of the small size of the Special Reconnaissance Unit, adequate supplies of medical equipment and a small dental kit, had to be carried for the crew in case of accident or sickness.

Besides this however, a considerable amount of medical work was carried out regularly among the natives, and for this purpose large quantities of drugs and other medical stores had been provided ... in view of value of medical attention among natives in promoting goodwill and winning friendship. These people, especially the children, suffer severely from yaws and from many other tropical diseases. The lesions of yaws disfigure and deform but fortunately are readily cleared up by a few injections of certain arsenical preparations, particularly NAB which is administered intravenously. Large supplies of NAB had been provided by Army for this work, and a full medical kit was always kept in readiness. At almost every anchorage throughout the whole of the 16 months covered by our patrols, the people would bring their sick, especially the children who were suffering from yaws, for injections and other treatment.

As an instance of the faith of these natives may be cited a case that occurred just before the ship sailed finally from Caledon Bay in April. A woman was brought to me who had had her arm badly broken in two places by the falling limb of a tree. No apparatus was available, and at first I was at a loss as to what I could do. At length however, a sheet of stringy bark was obtained and by cutting this so that it could be bent to form an elbow joint, a good and comfortable splint was improvised; and after the rather painful task of setting the broken bones had been completed and a sling made from a strip of calico, the woman went off happy.

Although this work was exacting and laborious and occupied a considerable amount of time, it was one of the most important influences in maintaining the friendship and goodwill of the people throughout the area, and therefore, apart altogether from the human aspect, well repaid the labour and expense involved. Even the most difficult and otherwise unapproachable people are often won over by attentions to their children, and at length the natives learn to depend [*sic*] to trust the man who will always help them, and will bring all their troubles to him.

Raising of the native force for Guerilla fighting and scouting

Simultaneous with the reconnaissance of the coast of Arnhem Land and the establishment of a coastal patrol to cover this area during the early part of 1942, the work of raising and training the nucleus of the native force, which was laid down as one of the primary tasks of this Unit, was carried out....

[p38] ... It is proposed now to set out in more detail the problems associated with this task, and the organisation of the detachment which was formed, as well as to give some account of its training and work.

(i) Natives of Arnhem Land.

... Westwards from the Liverpool River the native population has been already decimated by contact with white men and Asiatics, chiefly cattle men, buffalo shooters, beche-de-mer fishermen, pearlers and beachcombers. East of the Liverpool and particularly east of Cape Stewart the native population is much more numerous and more primitive,

and in parts of central Arnhem Land, around Arnhem Bay across to Caledon and Blue Mud Bays, the natives are still living unmodified, the lives of primitive nomadic hunters.

These people are great hunters and great travellers. Many of them are fierce and warlike in disposition, especially the so-called Caledon Bay people, the Balamumu or Tjapu who inhabit the country extending from the south of Arnhem Bay across to Caledon and Blue Mud Bays, including the hinterland of Blue Mud Bay and Woodah Island.

The density of the population is nowhere great in Arnhem Land. In 1935 I made a rough census, while engaged under commission from the Commonwealth Government, and estimated that these were then approximately only 3000 natives in Arnhem Land of which about 1500 lived in the country east of Cape Stewart. About 3 or 600 inhabited Caledon and Blue Mud Bay areas and the hinterland.

From time immemorial these people have been engaged on 'intertribal' warfare on a guerilla basis. They are extremely skilful in stealthy approach and specialise in attack from ambush. They are never at peace for any length of time, but are almost constantly organising raids, which take the form of long forced marches into the territories of their intended victims. These raiding parties are called *miringo* and at these times they travel generally in a single file, until the party is near its objective when they call a halt, while they send out two selected scouts called *miling* or spies to reconnoitre the enemy camp, to determine numbers and dispositions of the enemy.

The *miling* or scouts return to the main body which has meanwhile remained in concealment and report the results of their reconnaissance, and a plan of attack is formulated. The objective is to swoop suddenly upon the camp, attacking generally under cover of darkness, in the hour just before dawn. When they are about to attack the *miringo* or raiding party smear their bodies with white clay, which they say has the effect of exaggerating their numbers when seen in the dim light, and helps to throw their enemies into a state of confusion. The raiders now surround the camp and at a prearranged signal, rush in with [p39] a war cry calculated further to demoralise the surprised camp. They kill as many people as they can and then break away. The party disperses, each man making his escape individually so that it is the more difficult for the victims to organise and pursue them effectively. Later the *miringo* remuster at a rendezvous and travel by forced marches back to their own territory.

It has been pointed out elsewhere in this report that the natives are very different in many respects from the typical Australian aborigines, for they have long had contacts with Malay, and probably even earlier Proto-Malay peoples, who visited the area from Indonesia, coming down with the North west monsoon and returning with the South east. These contacts probably extended over hundreds of years and left a distinct impression on the people of the south coast of the Arafura Sea and the Gulf Coast of Arnhem Land. Much of their culture, their social and religious life as well as material culture, shows distinctly the profound effect of these contacts. The importance of this background will be appreciated too when these people are considered as potential guerilla soldiers. They are bold and fearless, they have long been accustomed to defend their country and their birthright against invaders from the sea, and are skilled in the practise of guerilla warfare, and often depend for their lives upon their skill. They live by their prowess in hunting, in laying an ambush, and in bushcraft.... Just as the natives of Arnhem Land differ greatly from those of all other parts of Australia by reason of these earlier contacts with more advanced peoples ... so also the people [are] ... not homogeneous.

There is a definite change in the people along the north coast - the lines of demarkation occurring in the vicinity of Cape Stewart. To the west ... the people were readily accessible to the Japanese who invaded the coast from 1936 onwards; they welcomed the Japanese and

traded their women to them, becoming demoralised and degraded by their contacts with these crews.

But to the east of Cape Stewart the demeanour of the natives was more reserved. It is true that they sold turtle and fish, and that they cut firewood for the Japanese, in return for tobacco and knives, but they could not be induced to trade their women; they sometimes quarrelled with the Japanese.

Farther east the attitude of reserve became intensified, until south of Arnhem Bay and at Caledon Bay the show of friendship was only superficial. It was the friendship of treachery, and as soon as the crews relaxed their vigilance the natives attacked and killed them. These people proved themselves masters in the art of dissembling; they approached vessels off the coast in their canoes. If their approach was seen, they were merely on a friendly visit, unarmed, for their weapons lay concealed on the floor of the canoe. But if they were not detected they boarded the ship, rushed the crew, and overwhelmed them. This ruse succeeded over and over.

[p40] These people formed the raw material from which [the] guerilla fighting unit was to be formed. They needed no tuition in the more subtle forms of ambush or in the harassing of an enemy. They needed only to be organised and led. I knew them well, for I had lived, hunted and travelled with them, knew their language and had their confidence, and believed that I could lead them. But in the art of guerilla fighting it was they who taught and I who came to learn.

Many of their guerilla raids could be taken as models of how such raids should be carried out - models in the ingenuity of their conception [and] in the minute detail of their clever organisation, as well as in the brilliance of their execution.

(ii) Organisation of Nucleus of Native Force.

On the initial voyage from Townsville to Darwin in January 1942 a call had been made at Derby River to pick up Raiwalla, a native of the Glyde River district who had served with me on two long expeditions in Arnhem Land....

In Darwin Raiwalla, though a full-blooded aboriginal, had been enlisted in the Army (No D 198) in February 1942, and he served constantly as my right hand man and as leader of the native detachments, in the raising of which he also rendered sterling assistance until April 1943. He accompanied me on all patrols on foot, and in addition, frequently took charge of detachments of the native Units and himself led many patrol and reconnaissance tasks, sometimes of an extended nature. Raiwalla was a fine hunter and was renowned throughout eastern Arnhem Land for his prowess as a spear fighter in single combat, though by this reputation he commanded the respect of the natives of the special force, he could be depended on at all times to act as peacemaker in quarrels or disputes....

Reference was made above to the native Bindjarpuma and his group at Arnhem Bay. Bindjarpuma had some experience of white men while serving with a police detachment at Caledon Bay, in 1926, and had since retired to the hills behind Arnhem Bay, his own clan territory, where he had established himself as leader of a band of outlaws, who waged an almost constant war with neighbouring groups. They conducted frequent raids and were responsible for many deaths in the area. In 1935 I organised a patrol and followed this man into his stronghold, made friends with him and remained some time with him. It was later reported in a communication from the NT Police to Dept of Interior that this man had succeeded in eluding me during the whole of the period in which I was working in this area, to stamp out tribal warfare. I had not been in the area since but I now made it my first objective in 1942 to re-establish contact with Bindjarpuma and to enlist him and eleven picked men from his group. If the statement that I had been unable to make contact with

this man, and that he had been able to elude my patrols, had been true, my influence among these people would have [p41] so dwindled that formation of a really effective fighting group would have been impossible. It was imperative that in each area where recruiting was to be carried out, the men chosen should be representative of the dominant fighting men of the area and these men trained and disciplined. Some of these had of course to be left to guard their territory in the meantime....

... The enlistment of this Arnhem Bay Group was completed on March 7th and we were then ready to proceed to Caledon Bay.... Bindjarpuma had been long engaged in raids upon his neighbours, and he was therefore very bad friends with the people of Caledon Bay. As these peoples represented the best of the fighting tribes, and I intended to work with them in one unit, it was essential that they should first be brought together. In order to effect this, and to avoid the possibility of a clash between them when I was not there to prevent this, I set off overland on March 8th for Caledon Bay with this detachment.

At the onset I had promised the natives that I would remain with them and lead them myself, for they knew me well and I knew their language, so that they had no fear that they might be led into a trap as might otherwise have been the case.

The journey across to Caledon Bay was a severe one, for the men were in first class training and vied with one another to set the pace. It is necessary on at least some of these journeys to take the initiative from the leaders and force the pace for them in order to retain their respect as a leader. This is not difficult for a few hours, but to sustain it over two long days without letting up and without appearing to flag or tire is a very severe ordeal.

Once again no natives were found at Caledon Bay, but they were eventually located inland behind Trial Bay. Wongo, the head man of this territory is a man with an influence greater than that of any other native I have known, and a reputation certainly never approached by that of any other Australian aborigine. This he owes even more to his remarkable personality than to his renown as a fighting man. I had not seen Wongo since 1937 and the old man greeted me now like a son. When I had seen him first I had had to convey him a message from the Government, that it was not pleased with him, and that he must maintain peace in his territory. But in spite of his sinister reputation for treachery, and the many attacks he was reputed to have organised on luggers and other small craft in these waters, I liked and respected him for his strength and character. I found him at all times straightforward; he never broke a promise to me and I felt that I had his regard and respect. In 1935 when I first met Wongo, three of his sons - Natjialma, Mau and Ngarkaiya were serving life sentences in Fanny Bay Gaol for the killing of Japanese. I promised to take a message to his sons, whom I believed to have been wrongly sentenced, and in the following year I was able to secure their release and to take them back to their territory.²⁰

This time I had to tell the old man that I had come to enlist his support in preventing the Japanese from landing in his country, to tell him that the Government now wanted his sons to kill Japanese, and to recruit some of his men for service and training. He promised me at once the men I wanted, and [p42] offered me five of his six sons who were with him, to serve with me, including the three men, Natjialma, Mau and Ngarkaiya.... But it took some time to convince these people that they could really kill Japanese who landed in this territory, without incurring the ire of the Government, and being visited with yet another punitive expedition, and Mau for long remained sceptical. But that night the ring of iron on iron, the sound of forging of the 'shovel' spears were heard in camp, and the rasp of

20. For further details concerning the influential men and their Darwin trials, see Berndt R.M. and Berndt C.H., *Arnhem Land, its history and its people*. Melbourne, 1954, 153-76.

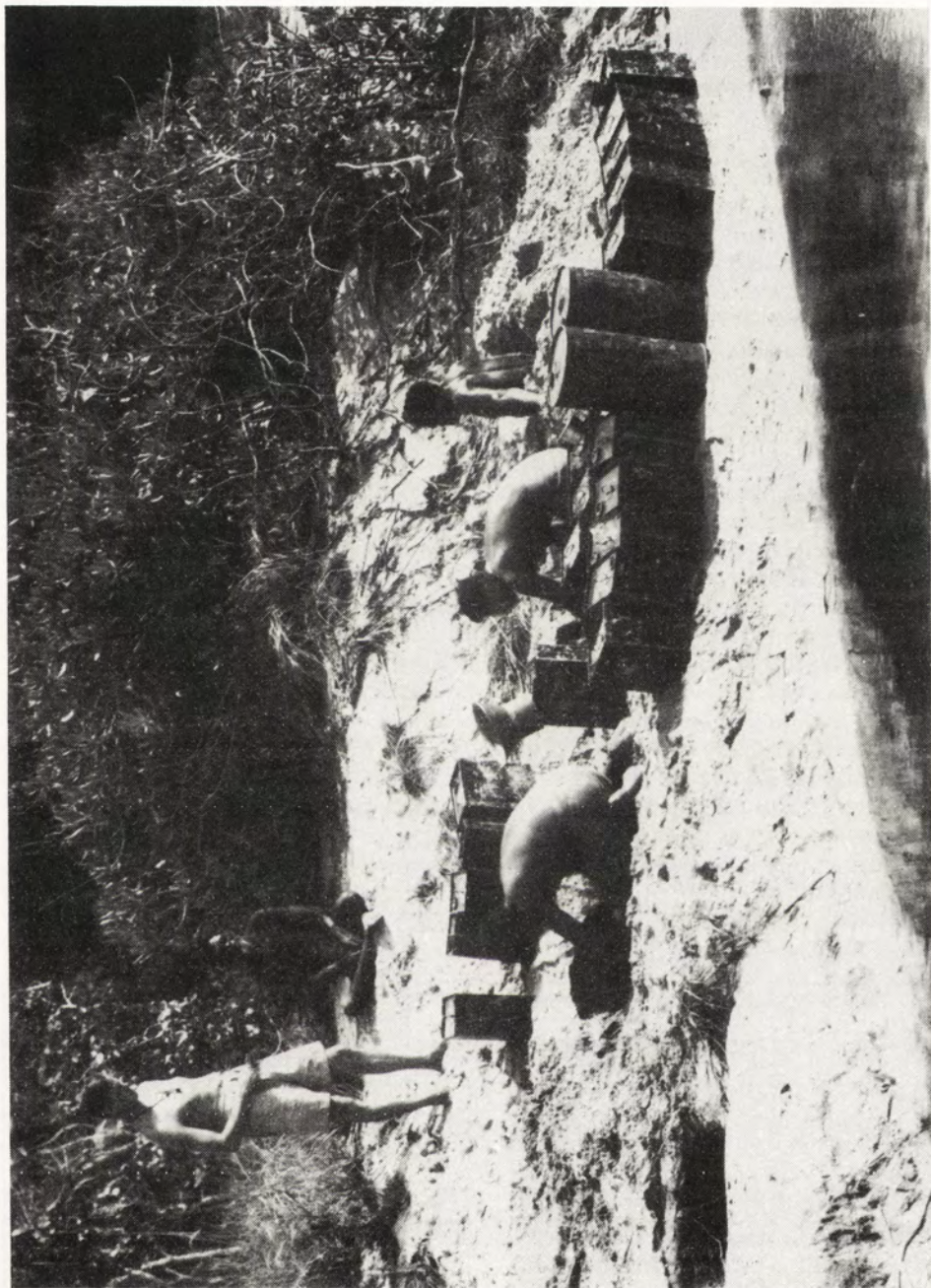


Plate 6. Concealing a fuel dump by the sea. Wongo is the seated person (Thomson Coll., NMV).

whetstones on spear blades. From this time on, it would have been difficult indeed for even a large enemy landing party to have progressed far in the territory of these warrior people.

Negotiations were carried out between Bindjarpuma's group, now working as a section with the ship, who were camped apart, for the formal 'squaring up' to settle their differences and to terminate the feud. In the meantime, to avoid a possible clash, I lived ashore with these people in their camp.

This 'squaring up' means a formalised ordeal, in which the culprits or scapegoats in each group, who are held responsible for the killing of a member or members of the other group, become the champions and run the gauntlet of spears thrown at them before the assembled people. It is a spectacular pageant like a joust of which there is no time to tell here. If the culprit escapes and comes through the ordeal unmarked by a spear, he must still present his thigh to be speared, and a spear is thrust right through the leg muscles to let blood flow, after which the wrong which has been suffered is considered to have been expiated and friendly relations are re-established between the parties. After this ordeal two of our men were crippled for a couple of weeks, but the bad blood had passed and the group had been brought together to work in unity.

It may appear that this has little to do with the raising of a native Unit, but as the relationship which exists between the members of the group and the success of team work depend on the appreciation of just these things, it is essential to understand native customs and behaviour. To have the full confidence of these complex 'primitive' people sufficiently to lead them it is necessary to know their language and be prepared literally to live and work with them. In return, however, they will give loyalty and an unswerving devotion to duty which, if it rests on personal respect and attachment and has something of hero worship, is nevertheless very real. Properly led, under the severe conditions of their own territory, these people are capable of enduring hardships and suffering sustained privations without flinching, that would be impossible to most white soldiers.

Discipline, which is essential in this, as in any other organisation, rests on very subtle factors, and is closely linked with that regard and respect which must be won and which the native himself must bestow.

Enlistment of the force required was now completed, and the fifty natives of this small force were organised roughly into sections on a territorial basis, so that each section would be led by a man from its own group.

The names of the personnel of this force, and their territories are set out here with other data in tabular form.

No	Native Name	Group	Locality	Wife	Children		Remarks
					male	female	
1	Raiwalla [I]	Mildjingi	Glyde River	3	1	1	Enlisted as a soldier at Darwin (D178) 1942. Paybook No 2976; a renowned fighting man who accompanied me across Arnhem Land on foot in 1935, and was with me in 1936-7 on many long journeys on foot.
2	Buti	Lia-galau-wumirr	Upper Glyde River	3	-	3	
3	Nglu-mar-mar	Djinang	Glyde River	2	3	2	
4	Dia-ngan-ngan	Dai-gur-gur	Buckingham Bay	2	1	-	
5	Ngonbaralli	Burara	Cape Stewart	-	-	-	

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6	Wawoi	Gunwingo	Upper Liverpool River	-	-	-	
7	Billin-yarra	Wulaki	Derby River	-	-	-	
8	Dingarilli	Djinang	Glyde River	1	1	1	
9	Nupir-ni	Djinang	Glyde River	1	-	-	
10	Mugaboi	Burara	Cape Stewart	-	-	-	
11	Mill-ill-illi	Djinang	Glyde River	-	-	-	
12	Mul-urk	Burara	Cape Stewart	-	-	-	
[13]							[Details omitted from original]
14	Gatepapai	Marango	East Arnhem Bay	1	-	-	Members of group 'outlaws' led by Bindjarpuma during 1936-37, No 2 Section.
15	Wurawul	Ritamgo	Upper Glyde River	1	-	1	Raiwalla (No 1) and Wurawul accompanied me on a journey across Arnhem Land on foot in 1935 and both went with me throughout the whole of the work carried out in Arnhem Land during 1936-37
16	Lia-dari	Kopapoingo (Daigur-gur)	Buckingham Bay	-	-	-	No 2 Section
17	Tjurr-pum	Tjambarpoingo	Buckingham Bay	-	-	-	No 2 Section
18	Bin-yin-nyi-woi	Tjambarpoingo	Buckingham Bay	-	-	-	No 2 Section
19	Wut-janau-woi	Tjambarpoingo	Buckingham Bay	1	-	1	No 2 Section
20	Manbanarra	Djinang	Lower Glyde River	-	-	-	No 2 Section
21	Bindjarpuma [2]	Wanguri	East Arnhem Bay	4	1	3	Bindjarpuma is a man of the Wanguri clan of Arnhem Bay. He went to the Caledon Bay about 1926 with a party of police, and has for some years lived the life of an outlaw in the hinterland of Arnhem Bay. He has carried out much guerilla fighting and figured in many avenging expeditions, so that his name has become feared throughout Arnhem Land. He is a great traveller as well as a renowned leader of a fighting band. The best of his group, the men whose numbers range from 22-31 were recruited with Bindjarpuma, these men served with Unilt for six months. They were at Katherine; at the OP at Gulnare Bluff with Sgt Elkington throughout, on Maria Island, the McArthur River and Groote Eylandt and O. They were returned to their own territory and released in September, 1942

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22	Nyainga	Dallaiwa-ngo	East Arnhem Bay	3	3	-	
23	Bangalliwoi	Tjambarpingo	Buckingham Bay	4	1	3	
24	Djimbur	Dallwango	South Arnhem Bay	-	-	-	
25	Daipurrinyun	Dartiwoi	SE Arnhem Bay	-	-	-	
26	Kumbania	Dallwango	South Arnhem Bay	-	-	-	
27	Yalparr	Dallwango	South Arnhem Bay	-	-	-	
28	Bundamarpa	Dallwango	South Arnhem Bay	-	-	-	
29	Koigurro	Dallwango	South Arnhem Bay	1	-	-	
30	Yirlungi	Dartiwoi	S.E. Arnhem Bay	2	1	-	
31	Kandallsall	Dallwango	South Arnhem Bay	1	-	-	
32	Natjialma [3]	Tjapua	Inland South Caledon Bay	1	1	2	Note: Nos 32-37 are all sons to Wongo of Caledon Bay. Natjialma, Mau and Ngarkaiya were released from famy Bay Gaol, Darwin, in 1936, on my recommendation to Commonwealth Government and taken back by me to Caledon Bay, 1936.
33	Mau	Tjapua	Inland South Caledon Bay	1	1	-	
34	Ngarkaiya	Tjapua	Inland South Caledon Bay	1	-	-	
35	Mauwunboi	Tjapua	Inland South Caledon Bay	2	-	-	
36	Djerliwoi	Tjapua	Inland South Caledon Bay	-	-	-	
37	Bamdakka	Tjapua	Inland South Caledon Bay	-	-	-	
38	Wawit	Marango	Trial Bay	1	2	-	Crossed Arnhem Land and accompanied me on extensive journey on foot in 1935.
39	Mitilli	Marango	Trial Bay	1	2	-	
40	Nungunu	Marango	Trial Bay	-	-	-	No 38-44 all sons of one man of the Blue Mud Bay area, Kararambo.
41	Mullaiyall	Marango	Trial Bay	1	-	-	
42	Putjiya	Marango	Trial Bay	1	-	-	
43	Wakkuraitpi	Marango	Trial Bay	-	-	-	
44	Bullambi	Wanguri	South Arnhem Bay	2	-	4	
45	Kumuk	Dallwango	South Arnhem Bay	-	-	-	
46	Mangirri	Gunibidgi	South Arnhem Bay	2	-	3	

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47	Yirindilli	Gunibidgi	Liverpool River	1	1	2	Liverpool River area: belong to No 1 Section.
48	Kuninbai	Gunibidgi	Liverpool River	-	-	-	Liverpool River area: belong to No 1 Section.
49	Wulngana	Tjapu	Inland, South of Caledon Bay	1	-	-	Recruited at the Roper River where he was a fugitive from his people 24/3/42. In expedition of 1935.
50	Marrilyauwoi	Wagillak	Walker River, Blue Mud Bay	1	-	-	
51	Djungi	Tjapu	Trial Bay	-	-	-	Son of Takaira [sic] who was released from Fanny Bay Gaol but who never returned home. Enlisted on second visit to Trial Bay.

Notes:

- [1] Indicates Section Leader, Raiwalla, No 1 Section, gathered from the area extending from the Liverpool River, Cape Stewart, the Derby, Glyde and Goyer Rivers, to Buckingham Bay. No 14, Gatepapai, belongs to No 2 Section below. See also note on history of Raiwalla. Nos 1-13 plus 15, 16, 47 & 48. Total of 17 men.
All natives No 1-20 have been issued with wires for spears, knives and axes.
- [2] Section Leader, No 2 Section, consisting of 21-31 plus Nos 14, 17, 18, 19, & 20, a total of 16 men.
Nos 21-31 have been issued with wires for spears and with knives; Nos 21, 22, 23, 27, 29 and 31 were issued with axes.
- [3] Natjialma, leader of No 3 Section, which includes Nos 32-46, plus 49, 50 and 51. Total of 18 men. Natjialma, Mau and Ngarkaiya figured in the attacks on the Japanese at Caledon Bay some years ago, which had led to the disturbances of 1933-34. All are renowned fighters. These people were recruited in the Caledon-Blue Mud Bay Area.
All natives 32-34 issued with wire for spears and with knives and fishing lines and hooks. Nos 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 44, 46 & 48 issued with axes.
- [4] These groups are localised totemic clans; the social grouping in Eastern Arnhem Land is aberrant and there is nothing exactly comparable with the 'Tribe' of most other parts of Australia.

Arms, equipment and training of native police

[p48] It was not intended ... in training these nomadic people, to attempt to turn them into orthodox soldiers or train them in parade ground tactics, although they were drilled with the crew, but merely to instil into them the elements of discipline, so that they would be capable of carrying out scouting work in conjunction with regular formations.

Nor was it intended at any stage to arm them with rifles. It was decided to encourage them to use their own weapons, the spear and the spear thrower, which they understood, and with which they displayed great skill; furthermore, in jungle warfare, where a small force was expected to harry a much larger and stronger force, this would have taken the form of harassing tactics chiefly from ambush - picking off sentries and stragglers from the main body, killing men as they went to water, killing scouts and attacking detachments and OPs. And for these tactics, which would be carried out largely at night, the effect on enemy morale, of having men constantly picked off or wounded with spears would be considerable, particularly as they would have no means of assessing the numbers of so elusive an enemy.

The natives were encouraged therefore, to carry as a full complement of weapons, one spear thrower, three fighting spears, either 'shovel nosed' or stone tipped, and one wire fish spear, so that they would be prepared at any time to hunt fish or game, as well as to fight. In addition, certain items of equipment, directed to assist and encourage the members of the detachment in hunting for food and game, were issued on a set scale. These consisted of tomahawks, knives, fishing lines and fish hooks. Two pieces of strong calico and a blanket were also issued to each man. Each of the men were issued with a number carved on a brass disc around his neck.

Each man received a weekly issue of at least three sticks of tobacco at all times. When they were carried with the ship, or were working in camp, so that they could not hunt, they were issued regularly with rice, flour and some tinned food. At other times they hunted for their food and in this way alone they do not become dependent and so lose their skill in hunting and stalking, the qualities which are essential to the successful operation of such a force.

Each day for weeks the crew of the vessel were sent ashore regularly for rifle and bayonet drill to maintain their alertness and efficiency, and to prepare them to handle a boarding party. At the same time as this work was in progress, the native force was turned out on parade and drilled in elementary movements. They were taught to come to attention, to dress, and to know right and left turns. Regular inspections of kit and weapons were held to ensure that these were well maintained. It was, however, considered highly undesirable to teach the natives to move in any orthodox formations which would at once reveal to an enemy the fact that they had been trained. They were instructed, in the event of a landing, to return the metal discs with their numbers inscribed which had been issued to them, and to abandon the calico which might suggest a 'uniform' or at least indicate the presence of white men in the area.

None was issued with rifles or taught to handle these with the exception of Raiwalla who was an enlisted soldier, and who was trained to use rifle and bayonet, and carried out regularly the duties of sentry, but the natives were given frequent demonstrations on the avoidance of MG [machine gun] fire. They were also shown that an MG nest was as vulnerable to attack by stealth as another post.

All the natives were however instructed, and given practice in the use of Molotov cocktails, in view of the plan to employ these to attack aircraft on the ground or fuel dumps if the [p49] enemy should attempt to occupy the aerodromes on the islands off the coast. The natives proved adept in the handling of Molotov cocktails and looked forward eagerly to an opportunity of demonstrating their skill.

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The members of the native detachment were issued with the following items of personal equipment - two pieces of calico to serve as loin cloths or 'lava lavas', fishing lines, fish hooks, wire for fish spears, sheath knives and what tomahawks were available, the object of this issue being to assist the natives in hunting and fishing and so to render them more independent of stores supplied from the ship, since, with efficient equipment less time was required to secure game, fish, 'sugar bag' or wild honey, and vegetable foods. In addition, it was intended by this means to demonstrate to the Solomon Island natives, as well as to the white personnel, the methods of food capture and food preparation employed by these aborigines.

Blankets were issued to the initial nucleus of the native forces, but these were used only when they were aboard the ship or in working or training camps close to the main party. At all other times the natives travelled with their weapons and tomahawks only, for these people are expert in the arts of travelling light and living hard.

The work of organising and leading the natives was my own special responsibility as I was the only one who knew the natives and their language, and particularly because ... discipline among these people depends on personal relationships and loyalties. This is probably to a large extent the reason why station owners and cattle men speak with disparagement of the loyalty and constancy of the aborigine; they very often work the natives, but rarely understand them, and there appears to the native no very good reason why he should give the dog-like loyalty and devotion of which he is capable to men who openly show their contempt for him.

During the months of 1942 in which we were engaged primarily in raising and training these natives, I took advantage of every opportunity of keeping up and improving my own training in bush travel, in hunting and living on the country. I made a number of long severe patrols on foot with the natives and during this time I accustomed myself to travelling long distances in the bush, even across the rugged stony hills, barefooted, and strove to keep my feet hard by travelling wherever possible without boots. The object of this training was to equip myself to lead the natives on night raids without leaving boot tracks to indicate the presence of a white leader with the natives.

The necessity for this rigid training may now be doubted, but it must be remembered that at this time, during 1942, we were preparing to meet a Japanese landing which seemed almost certain, and to continue to live and fight on in this country it was necessary to be prepared to live like a blackfellow. I had already lived, travelled and hunted with these people for more than two years, almost as one of themselves, and it did not take long to adapt myself again. We were able to promise the natives that they would not be short of tobacco, and to assure [*sic*] this we obtained several hundredweights of trade tobacco. They in turn agreed to remain with me and to help to feed the white personnel if the Japanese should land on the eastern flank.

The great value of a detachment of this kind lies in the astonishing capacity possessed by the natives to find their way at night through dense rough country without landmarks and without the use of a compass. In this way they are able to reach an objective noiselessly and unerringly, to attack, to disperse and to re-assemble at a rendezvous in a way that would not be possible to any white scouts, however well trained they were. I have swum mangrove fringed creeks with these people in the [p50] darkness to reach objectives which with white troops would have been impossible, and would merely have resulted in their being injured and hopelessly lost. But it has to be admitted that they could only be led by men who knew them and whom they would follow without question.

Operations of native unit

During 1942 a thorough reconnaissance was carried out by the natives of both banks of the Roper River, as well as of the Hodgson and the Wilton. An extended patrol was carried out by a small party (detached at the Roper River), right across Arnhem Land to the Crocodile Islands on the Arafura Sea where a rendezvous was made with the ship party and was kept.

The whole of the detachment of 51 natives was transported to Katherine in anticipation of a similar role on the west flank, where Captain Morgan and his party had already been working in advance... Subsequently ... a detachment of 12 natives under Bindjarpuma (No 21 to 31 and No 14) were stationed with Sergeant Elkington at the OP at Gulnare Bluff for more than two months, and did excellent work not only in watching the entrance and approaches to the Roper River, but also in carrying out extensive scouting patrols to the north and south.

Subsequently, these same men were divided into three detachments of which two were on the *Aroetta* and of these two detachments, one was landed at Maria Island while the ship proceeded to the McArthur River. The second detachment was employed on an extensive reconnaissance of the mouth and estuarine reaches of the McArthur River and of Vanderlin Island in the Pellew Group, and the third detachment accompanied me to Adelaide River, and thence across the Hodgson overland by MT to Borroloola on the McArthur.

Further reconnaissance with this native force was carried out on Groote Eylandt at various times in order to familiarise the natives with the approaches to the landing areas which might have been occupied by enemy forces.

Some reference has been made to the question of discipline among the members of this native Unit, and the importance of maintaining control and authority. With one exception the discipline and obedience of these natives was very good, but, once in the initial stages of the work with the native force, a detachment from Caledon Bay, who afterwards proved themselves among the best and most reliable men, absented themselves and finally set off overland to their own territory. This was in part due to the dislike of discipline and restraint natural in a nomadic people whose territory has never been brought under administrative control, and partly due to interference by white men on the Roper River. While the Unit was camped at the Four Mile Landing the owner of Urapunga Station reported to the Police at Roper Bar his premises had been entered, and alleged that clothing and food had been stolen. Without any evidence other than the supposition of his own station boys he accused the Caledon Bay members of the native force of having entered his property. Subsequent enquiry proved that the Caledon Bay natives had nothing whatever to do with this matter. Investigation showed that the building had not been locked, that the station natives were left in charge, and also that none of the tracks resembled those of the Caledon Bay detachment. It appeared probable that the sophisticated natives of the settled station country, or the Roper area, who were well aware of the sinister reputation of the Caledon Bay natives, against whom several excursions of a punitive character had already been organised by Roper Police, took advantage of the presence of these people in the area, knowing that suspicion would inevitably fall on them. The Police Constable then at the Roper River made a call at the *Aroetta* during my absence inland at Katherine with Lieutenant Palmer, when an NCO only was in charge of the ship. [p51] The Caledon Bay and other natives were camped at this time beside the ship, but when the Police took the unwarranted action of visiting the ship in my absence the natives whose previous experience of the Police was when they came to their territory and shot up the area, became uneasy, and a few days later slipped away and set off overland for Caledon Bay.

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A few weeks elapsed before I was able to return to their territory, but on 8th June they arrived home at the camp at Trial Bay when the *Aroetta* was anchored there. Wongo, the head man of this area, was then summoned, and a meeting was held at which all the natives, including those who had been AWL, was held and the seriousness of this action in returning without permission was instilled into them. Tact and compromise has to be used to temper discipline among these natives, as indeed must be the case among all primitive people, especially those of a proud and warlike disposition. This incident actually was a land mark in the development of this force, for the old men of the group upheld me staunchly and as a result, all the men who had returned home volunteered to serve again, and returned with the vessel for a further period of work on the Roper and McArthur Rivers, where they completed their service with credit. A few days before the ship sailed the natives made a ceremonial presentation to me of a sacred object of great value which is one of their methods of expiating a serious offence, generally a killing, when it is desired to make peace and avoid the starting of a blood feud.

In this way, therefore, by gaining the support of Wongo of Caledon Bay and the other influential old men, and by establishing among the people themselves, a sense of pride in service and shame in the idea of breaking faith in the undertaking that they agreed to complete, this incident was turned to good account. It should be added that these people served for the remainder of the reconnaissance with credit. None deserted again and all were eventually returned to their home territories in the *Aroetta*.

But this was not the only work on which this force was engaged, and after the completion of the reconnaissance of eastern Arnhem Land including Groote Eylandt, the Roper and McArthur Rivers and the outlying Islands, the members of the native unit were employed at Caledon Bay on the construction of a house and store at the OP and in the clearing and making a garden there....

By September 1942, when the *Aroetta* was due to proceed to Townsville to refit, the most important part of the work of the natives had been completed. The nucleus of the force required had been trained as far as it was considered advisable ... and they were then returned to their own country where it was considered that they would serve a useful function in spreading amongst the members of their own groups the information as to what would be required of them in the event of a Japanese force landing in this region. Arrangements were also made to maintain regular contact with representative members of this skeleton force in the future, through the OP ... at Caledon Bay.

In conclusion I feel that I cannot leave this subject without stressing the importance of the work carried out by these people, who, from a sense of duty and goodwill gave unselfishly all that they had to give, their service and their freedom. The other side of the picture is too often shown. While the work that I have described was in progress ... [p52] the following, which was published in Sydney on March 15, 1942, is typical of the statements which appeared in the press regarding these natives:

... Thousands of wild aborigines in the Coastal Areas of the vast Northern Territory constitute one of the greatest potential fifth columns. These wild blacks ... for gifts of tobacco and food would be willing to aid anybody, whether white or yellow....

But these people whose territory had never been brought under control, whose only experience in many cases, of the white man was of the police who had visited them intermittently to carry out punitive raids to 'disperse' them, who left voluntarily the peace and security of their country, their wives and the children who mean more than life to them, gave their liberty for month after month. Freely, and without complaint, they submitted to the rigorous discipline, and without pay, without any guarantee of reward, with only the

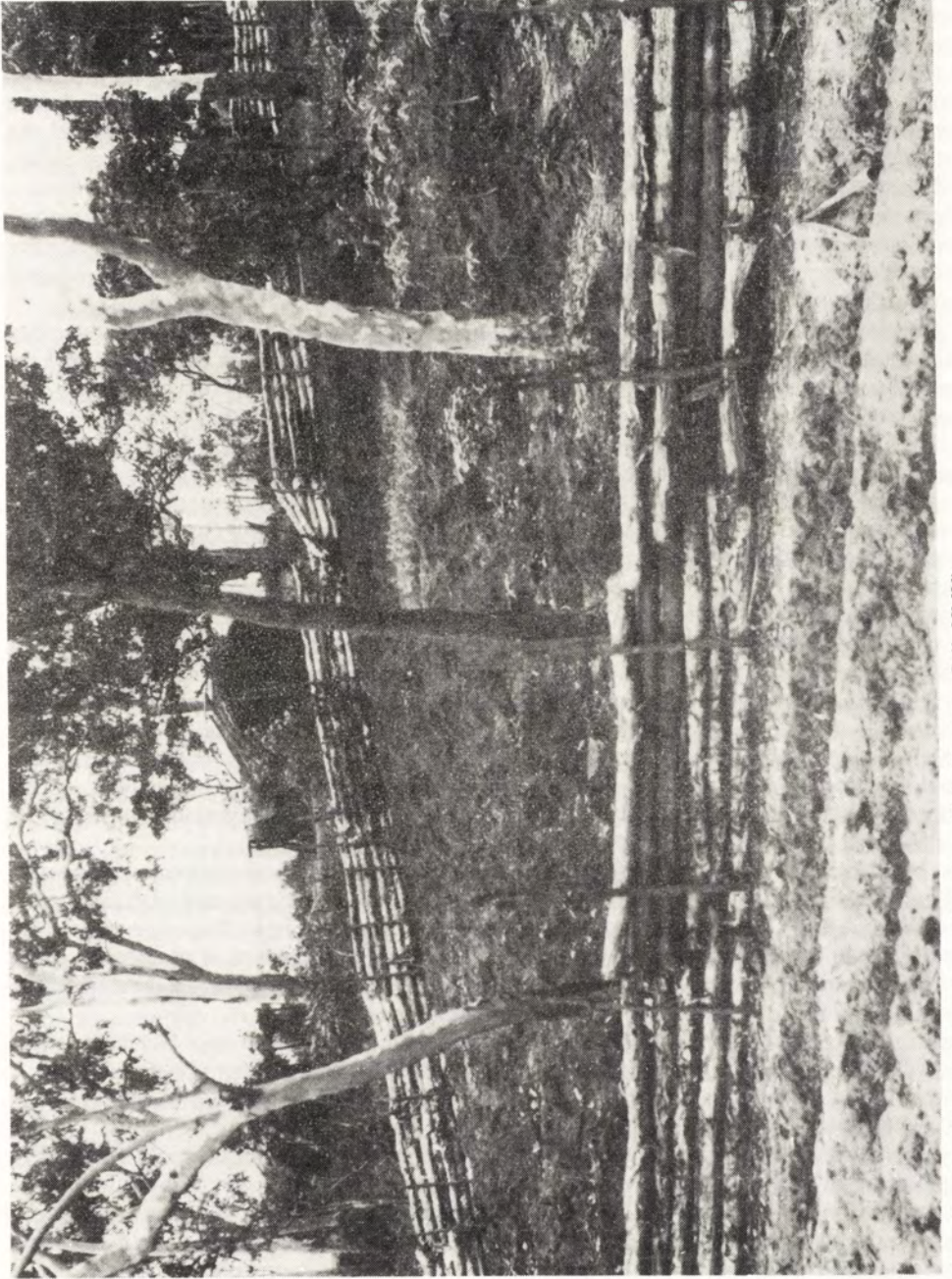


Plate 7. The Caledon Bay outpost and gardens, 1942 (Thomson Coll., NMV).

most primitive equipment, and without arms or weapons, they gave their best in loyalty, unrelenting hard work and sweat, in the stronghold of the people from whom they had known neither justice nor understanding. When they had killed Japanese before in defence of their own territories they had been exiled and imprisoned. But now, they prepared again to kill Japanese with weapons that they forged for themselves, beating out their spearheads, cold, from odds and ends of metal such as old drums, water tanks from wrecked ships, old horse shoes, and even from odd pieces of galvanised water pipe.

I would be failing in my duty therefore if I did not bring forward for very special notice the names of two men who gave unswerving loyalty, who displayed a devotion to duty that served as an example to all who worked with them. These men are Raiwalla, a native of the Glyde River, North-central Arnhem Land, and Natjialma of Caledon Bay, two full-blooded natives of Arnhem Land of whose outstanding service special mention is made in Section 14, in which they have been recommended for special awards.

Reconnaissance (Roper River & Boorooloola [sic] areas)

[p53] ... Short reconnaissance reports on these areas, with maps prepared during the patrols, are included in Appendix IV at the end of this report.

Establishment of the O.P. at Caledon Bay

... We arrived at Caledon Bay on August 4th [1942].... An excellent site, with a good water supply near the beach, was found at the north end of the Bay, to the east of Point Middle. Work was commenced at once on the construction of a house of two rooms, one of which was to serve as a store, and the other as living quarters. An area of about an acre was cleared, fenced with bush timber and sown with vegetables. The detachment of natives, still 50 strong, was employed on the clearing of ground for the garden, and [on] stripping stringy bark for the walls and roof of the house, the construction of which was carried out under Lieutenant Palmer's supervision.

The soil in this area is ... relatively poor and sandy but to compensate for this we called at Low Rock on return from the Roper River and collected many bags and barrels of guano there which, though an unpleasant and laborious business, was well repaid, for the garden responded to an extraordinary degree and within eight weeks of clearing the area it was yielding beans and salads for the crew. During my visit to HQ I had obtained some vegetable seeds from Lieut Campbell at Adelaide River and also secured additional plants such as bananas and pawpaw at Groote Eylandt, Yirkala [sic] and Milingimbi when on patrol.

On account of the reputation of the Caledon Bay people for aggressiveness I undertook the work of establishing the garden and OP in person and remained there for two or three weeks to set up the organisation. As arrangements had been completed at Norforce for the refit of the ship in Townsville before the end of the dry season it was necessary that the departure ... should not be delayed for long if the vessel was to return to her station before the onset of the north west monsoon.... Before the ship left the area the natives who had been recruited for the special unit had to be returned to their own territory and I planned in conjunction with this, to carry out a final extended patrol along the coast of the Arafura Sea as far west as the Liverpool River, and to visit Cape Stewart, the Crocodile Islands, and the Wessels, before leaving the area.

[p54] By August 18th work on the OP was completed and fully equipped, and Pte Kapiu ... Bosun on the *Aroetta*, was placed in full charge of the OP. Kapiu knew these natives well, was on a friendly footing with them and was therefore deemed the most suitable man to place in charge at this time.

On August 19th the *Aroetta* sailed on a further extensive patrol to the North. A visit was made to Port Bradshaw where a rough survey of the small boat or flying boat anchorages was made by Lieutenant Palmer and myself....

By September 13th this patrol of the Northern coastline and the Wessel Islands had been completed, the natives all returned home, and the vessel returned to Caledon Bay. Everything had progressed smoothly there, and Pte Kapiu had nothing of importance to report during the absence of the *Aroetta*.

It was now necessary to prepare the OP to carry on during the absence of the vessel in Queensland, and to establish two way WT communication. The set which had been impressed for the OP at Gulnare Bluff was not giving satisfactory service, and accordingly I sent the *Aroetta* to Groote Eylandt to the Civil Aviation Flying Boat Base and to the RAAF AOB to endeavour to have the set repaired and tested, and to secure other WT material. Meanwhile I remained at the OP to complete work on the station.

Very little additional WT equipment was available at Groote, but Sgt Harvey ... was able to establish satisfactory two way communication with Groote Eylandt with this equipment brought back with the ship. On account of the limited range of the set and the uncertainty of communication direct with Darwin it was considered advisable to arrange schedules with RAAF at Groote and to arrange for this station to pass to Advance HQ Norforce all reports and messages from the OP.

... Sgt Elkington was selected to take charge of the OP and to remain there during the absence of the ship in Queensland. It was estimated that the refit would occupy about six weeks, although as no priority was given to the work when the vessel first arrived in Townsville, a long delay occurred and this period was much extended. Sgt Elkington, who had been in charge of the OP at Gulnare Bluff and who had done excellent work there, volunteered to remain. It was not possible to leave the WT Operator as he was essential on the ship and in addition, the period of his secondment from the RAAF had long expired.

By September 19th all arrangements had been completed and Sgt Elkington was placed in charge of the OP with Operation Order 9 ... setting out the work with which he was entrusted. In particular, the maintenance of good relations with the natives of the area....

On September 20th the *Aroetta* sailed for Groote Eylandt en route for Townsville....

[p55] While the vessel was still at Townsville in December, a signal was received ... from Norforce reporting that Sgt Elkington had experienced some trouble with the natives at Caledon Bay, and requesting that steps be taken to reinforce the post with another white man. I was at this time absent from Townsville on duty, it was impossible to judge the nature of the trouble at that distance and ... the only white members of the Unit at this time were Palmer, who was in charge of the *Aroetta* and crew in Townsville and who did not know the natives of the Caledon Bay area, and myself (engaged in obtaining necessary stores and equipment to complete the refit)....

And in view of the implication of the post and the risk of seriously upsetting the whole of the organisation so painstakingly built up among the natives, it was decided that I should return by air to clear up the trouble, and leave Lieut Palmer to bring the ship around later.

I returned to Groote Eylandt by flying boat at the end of December, and proceeded to Caledon Bay on the following day by Civil Aviation Department's launch, which was made available for this purpose.

On arrival at Caledon Bay it was found that all but a few of the natives had dispersed, and that the trouble which had occurred was primarily caused by the NCO who had been left in charge. It was ascertained that although sliding doors with secure fastenings and a padlock had been provided, and that he was provided with a strong box with padlock, to

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protect tobacco, he had been in the habit of leaving the post unlocked while he went on hunting trips in the bush. For some time it appeared, the natives had been helping themselves to small quantities of food and tobacco, and at first this had passed unnoticed. These depredations continued for some time, growing progressively larger, until they were at length discovered by Sgt Elkington, who then threatened the natives with a bren gun. Further troubles also occurred between this NCO and the natives with whom he adopted an aggressive and overbearing attitude. If it had not been for the goodwill and faithfulness of Natjialma of Caledon Bay ... and certain others of these people serious consequences would probably have resulted. As it was, Natjialma and Wongo, headman of Caledon Bay, kept the promise they had made to me, and guarded Sgt Elkington and the post until my return, dispersing the other natives in the meantime. The attitude of Sgt Elkington, and his unsuitability for work among natives, is indicated by entries in a log kept by him at the Caledon Bay Post, from which the following are quoted:

October 14 1942: Slippery and his gang turned up today, and this afternoon had a *makarata* at the beginning of which there was nearly a row, so had to put my foot down and use the .303 as umpire.

October 18th: Slippery very peeved because some one wants to pinch his wife, bullets are the only things these people understand, they need a good swift kick in the crutch.

It was particularly unfortunate that this NCO had been entrusted with the maintenance of this important post. Although the trouble which he experienced was largely brought about by his own actions, the signals which he originated at the time resulted in the visit of people to Caledon Bay who knew nothing of the territory or its people and which greatly increased the difficulty of the task I had to face when I returned.²¹

[p56] As soon as the *Aroetta* returned to Arnhem Land in charge of Lieut Palmer Sgt Elkington was returned to the ship, and I remained ashore at the Post to restore order and re-establish the good relations with the people. In spite of my own analysis of the cause of the small thefts of food and tobacco that had occurred, it was essential for purposes of discipline and control, that once the natives knew that I was aware that they had stolen these things, some adequate form of punishment should be meted out. Under the conditions which prevailed, this was a matter of some difficulty. I collected the most reliable of the men whom I worked with over a number of years and ordered them to muster all the men who had been concerned in the trouble at the OP in my absence, setting a time limit on the date of their return.

Bindjarpuma and his group were brought from Arnhem Bay on the Arafura Sea Coast, but it speaks much for the sense of justice and the faithfulness of these people, when once they have been treated with consideration and fairness, that every one of the natives concerned returned to Caledon Bay and not only admitted, but told me in detail, what he had done. One of the groups was formed into a labour gang, and given some weeks of hard labour in the garden. They were also required to make a payment of a large number of fish. During this period they were ordered to remain at the OP and were not permitted to leave the area on hunting expeditions. Every one of the natives, when the reason for this punishment was explained to him in his own language, admitted its justice and not one of them defaulted.

From the leader of another group, a large sea-going canoe was demanded, this being the only wealth that he possessed. It was an object of great material value involving probably

²¹ In fairness to Elkington, however, Thomson selected him and he enlisted at his request. Until this wet season episode, Thomson praised his actions.

days of search for a suitable tree, and then weeks of laborious work by a specialist in canoe building. But the most difficult problem, was that of dealing with Bindjarpuma and his followers, the most warlike group in the area who were ... a predatory band of outlaws in the hills between Caledon Bay and Arnhem Bay. It was necessary to punish this man, to humiliate him, as well as deprive him and his group of material possessions of value and to do this publicly. But it was equally necessary to convince him of the justice of the penalty. This would only have been possible to one he knew well or fighting would have ensued. On his arrival I greeted him as usual and then told him to fall in with his group of followers in full fighting array. This he did with a fine show of pride, for he was now on his mettle before his rivals the people of Caledon Bay itself. Then I spoke to these people of the trust that they had betrayed, and finally ordered each man to lay down his spears on the ground. This was a tense moment. So far I had carried them with me, but to have lifted these spears at once would have been a fatal mistake. For a few minutes I talked to them, stressing the enormity of the betrayal of the trust I, as their leader, had placed in them, and the depth of my own humiliation. Then I told them that I was taking forty two of their finest spears in expiation of their offence. After this I sent them back to their camp. For twenty four hours they remained. If they had left instantly, this would have portended trouble. As it was, within twenty four hours we were on our old footing except that my prestige had greatly been increased throughout the whole area, but it had been touch and go. At such times it requires but one man to hook his spear in haste and the harm is done. Once finished, such a matter must never be held up before them; they must never be reminded of it or they have what they know as 'heart jump', and they go berserk. These are fighting people, killers, whom I would have liked to lead in action against the Japanese. In a week or two after my return there were nearly two hundred natives in camp at the OP once more.

For some time it was necessary for me to leave this post and on this occasion Pte Kapiu, who had carried out the duties here so well on a previous occasion, was made Acting Sgt and again placed in full charge. [p57] He carried out this undertaking with great credit.

On March 1st, after discussion at Norforce, the OP was withdrawn from Caledon Bay prior to the reorganisation of the Special Reconnaissance Unit and my relinquishment of command, on account of the difficulty of obtaining officers who could handle these people. [A report dated 8-11-42 on the establishment of an Operational Post at Caledon Bay is omitted (ms pp 57-8).]

[p58] TO: LANDFORCES MELBOURNE
FROM NORFORCE

X7/6998
SECRET

REF GSI/7312 OF 3 DEC ELKINGTON REPORTED THROUGH RAAF GROOTE NATIVES ENTERED HOUSE STOLE TOBACCO 22 NOV. RINGLEADER TURNED NASTY TOOK TO BUSH WITH GANG. COMMUNICATIONS WITH ELKINGTON DIFFICULT AT TIME OWING FAULTY WT TRANSMITTER. RAAF GROOTE DESPACHED PARTY GRAYS CAMP PATCHED WT AND LEFT AIRMAN. NOW RECOMMEND ELKINGTON HAVE ADDITIONAL WHITE MAN ASSIST POST MAINTENANCE. POST REPORTED NORMAL 28 NOV BUT RAAF POST GROOTE BEING WITHDRAWN SHORTLY AND SERVICES AIRMAN ONLY TEMPORARILY AVAILABLE. NAOU VESSEL FROM ROPER BEEN DESPACHED INVESTIGATE BUT DO NOT WISH PLACE UNTRIED NAOU PERSON THOMSON AREA. CONSIDER ONE THOMSON PERSON AT TOWNSVILLE SHOULD RETURN GROOTE BY FLYING BOAT. WOULD ALSO APPRECIATE ETA AROETTA'S ARRIVAL THESE WATERS.
[pp 59-69 omitted]

[Special mention of meritorious service]

[p70] *Sgt Kapiu, Native of Badu, Torres Strait Islands:* Kapiu served throughout from October 1941 to May 1943 as Bosun on the *A.K. Aroetta*. He rendered exceptionally meritorious service and set a splendid example to his fellows. He was a fine seaman, experienced in sail, knew the Arnhem Land coast well, and became also an expert Vickers gunner. During the whole of these 19 months Kapiu served continuously without leave or respite.

When called for this special undertaking Sgt Kapiu was working at Thursday Island close to his home. Although then an old man he willingly left his work and his home from a sense of duty and loyalty. Of his fine service, his sense of responsibility and his great devotion to duty, I cannot speak too highly. Sgt Kapiu showed real qualities of leadership and by his loyal and unselfish service set a fine personal example to the other native members of the crew and to the whole of the native detachment.

Pte Makau, Polynesian Native from British Solomon Islands: Pte Makau was enlisted in the Solomon Islands with other members of the native crew for special service on a hazardous undertaking in 1941 and served until May 1943. He was in charge of the guard throughout the whole of his period of service and acquired considerable experience of armament. Pte Makau rendered service of outstanding merit. He set an example by his devotion to duty, which assisted materially in maintaining a high standard of discipline among the crew of this ship.

No D178 - Pte Raiwalla, Aborigine of Arnhem Land: For extraordinary loyalty, devotion to duty under difficulty and adverse conditions. Of all members of the Special Reconnaissance Unit, the service of this man stood apart. A full-blooded Aborigine, Raiwalla set an example of loyalty and selfless devotion to duty of a standard that few could follow. Pte Raiwalla, a nomadic Aborigine who had hitherto suffered only punishment for a native offence in an area not under control, gave his liberty, and placed service to country before love of family, which these people value more than life. [p71] Raiwalla was enlisted in Darwin in February 1942 and served until April 1943. He had established a reputation throughout Eastern Arnhem Land for his fighting prowess, and when enlisted he devoted the whole of his energies and influence to the work of undermining and destroying of Japanese influence and prestige and to assisting with the formation and training of the native Unit. Raiwalla made many long hard patrols over all sorts of country, often pressing on throughout the night without rest, in order to keep faith and to arrive at a rendezvous on time. This man's unflinching loyalty and whole hearted devotion, more than any other single factor, contributed to the building up of the native unit and the maintenance of order and discipline within this. Such was this man's sense of duty that when in the beginning of 1943 after his return to Townsville in the *Aroetta*, he found that his wife and two young children had been stolen and carried off into the Interior and he was offered his release, he refused to desert his post but insisted on remaining on duty until I relinquished command and he felt free from his obligation to remain with me.

This fine native soldier, by his high standard of duty and honour set an example to the crew of the *Aroetta* and to all members of the native force, and won the regard, affection and respect of every member of the unit.

Natjialma, Aborigine of Caledon Bay, Arnhem Land: Natjialma was one of the sons of the headman of Caledon Bay, five of whom were enlisted in the native force in 1942. Natjialma had been sentenced to life imprisonment for the killing of Japanese who had invaded his country some years ago, but in spite of this fact he served with the native force and was selected as leader of the Caledon Bay section. This man showed extraordinary

faithfulness throughout and rendered exceptionally meritorious service. Later when the OP was established at Caledon Bay he gave most valuable assistance in organising natives and maintaining order and discipline. It was largely faithfulness and sense of responsibility of this man that averted disaster to the NCO who was left in charge of the Caledon Bay Post in 1942.

Appendix 1

[This excerpt from the 28-page Appendix 1 is included to indicate the far-reaching expectations of Thomson concerning the involvement of Aboriginal warriors in Arnhem Land and island Southeast Asia. *This was written in June 1941 before Japan entered the war.*]

[p11] Preliminary reconnaissance

- 9 It is suggested that immediately approval for the development of the scheme under consideration has been obtained and the boat placed in commission, a careful reconnaissance be made of the coast-line ... It will enable an appreciation of the situation to be made, including an investigation of the extent of Japanese influence among the natives following the great influx of these people which occurred during 1936-7, when they took an unprecedented interest in this region and went out of their way to ingratiate themselves with the natives.
- 10 To attain this object, the Japanese lay for long periods close in shore and encouraged the natives to congregate at watering places - particularly at Elcho Island, Cape Stewart, the Liverpool and the King Rivers - and to come off to their vessels in canoes, by paying them for such trifling services as the cutting of firewood, the getting of water, fish, turtles, etc, at rates out of proportion to the value of the service rendered.
- 11 ... It will be appreciated that although their skill in bushcraft is of a high order, comparatively few of these men would be suitable for this work away from their own territories, and that these must be chosen with care. They cannot be drafted at a moment and they should not be collected into a regular military camp.
- 12 As I know the language of these people well and can trust and depend upon them, it is proposed that certain of their number may be of value in assisting to set up the coast watching organisation on the Western Australian side. [p12] There are some Arnhem Land natives who have previously had contact with natives from the West side of Darwin, and these men would be of special value in this connection, particularly as this area, though much better known than the Arnhem Land side, presents some difficulties in the establishment of an efficient coast watching system.

Training of personnel of Independent Companies in tropical bushcraft and in 'living on the country'

- 13 It is understood that one or more Independent Companies may be stationed in the vicinity of Darwin, and that ... personnel of this Company be taken in Sections and camped in a suitable area to be instructed in bushcraft under tropical conditions. For this work it is suggested that natives with special technological ability, such as good trackers, hunters, canoe builders, etc, should be selected to assist in equipping the personnel of the section on living in the bush under tropical conditions.
- 14 Natives can be employed to show them how to utilise bark and other materials for the erection of wet weather houses. Such houses of native materials are also more effectively camouflaged than tents. They are cooler and dispose of the need of cartage of

heavy equipment. Instruction can also be given in the building of rafts, canoes of bark and wood, in the use of swimming logs. The making of ropes and twine and the use of fire sticks can also be taught. It would also be of value to give each of the Sections some instruction in various methods of fish capture from improved traps, wires and fences, and to equip them to live on the country in emergency by some systematic instruction in the identification of food plants, shell fish and other resources on which a guerilla party might be obliged to depend.

- 15 The importance of a correct 'mental attitude' in living for long periods in the bush is stressed. This largely depends upon the confidence that comes with skill and experience. It is probable that a suitable area in which game, fish and vegetable foods are still abundant, could be selected as a training ground, reasonably close to Darwin.... [16 suggests areas where training possible.]
- 17 Concurrently, with the training of Sections of the Independent Company in tracking, bushcraft and in hunting and finding food, a selected band of native scouts might also be trained in the use of fire-arms and such elementary drill and discipline as would be necessary for efficient service and cohesion.

The organisation of native patrols

- 18 While it is felt that members of the Independent Company can readily be given instruction and practice in adapting themselves to live on the country or with a minimum of stores, in emergency, it is also felt that it will be very difficult to maintain a body of men, already highly trained and eager for active service, in a contented state for any considerable length of time. For this reason, it is proposed that if instruction is to be given in bushcraft as mentioned above, the main body should be stationed as near to civilisation and its amenities as is possible, that only small sections be taken to advanced camps at any one time, and that the period of time during which they remain detached in the bush away from the main body of the Company, should be strictly limited.
- 19 [p13] It is felt that this difficulty, which is anticipated in maintaining the morale of white troops chafing for action, has an important bearing on the suggestion to organise one or two sections of natives to be employed on patrol work, either for the flank protection of Darwin, in conjunction with Independent Companies, or for later infiltration in the Malay Archipelago.
- 20 The existence of such a body of scouts on a permanent basis would supply a continuity which would do much to compensate a frequent change in white personnel as the Company or Companies were moved elsewhere. They would form a useful standing body which could be employed for any long reconnaissance patrols that might be required, and they would form the nucleus of fighting patrols of natives which would be of incalculable value in active guerilla operations against the Japanese if an invasion should ever come to pass.
- 21 At the risk of labouring this point, the absolute necessity of permitting only specially selected officers, with proven ability in this direction, to handle natives, is pointed out. While I have no doubt whatever that the natives, especially a selected group from Arnhem Land, would make scouts without equal, and would also be capable of severely harassing a Japanese force by guerilla tactics, it would be worse that useless to place them under charge of an officer whose attitude was unsympathetic or who regarded them with contempt. Nowhere would the question of leadership be more important than in relation to these special troops.

- 22 In employing these natives it is also pointed out that they should never be brought into regular camp lines or barracks, nor should they be quartered in or near Darwin or any other large town. Where it is necessary to hold a section in one place they should be in an encampment of their own making, apart from other troops.
- 23 Where possible, their employment should be based on a modification of their own tactics and organisation. In other words, it is suggested that successful handling of these, and probably of most other native troops, rests on the ability of the officers to adapt their organisation and methods, and to modify these skilfully when employing them, rather than to endeavour to insist on training the natives in orthodox military methods. The officer can then employ his own initiative to bridge the gap.

Service in Malay Archipelago

- 24 In initial discussions on this scheme, I was under the belief that the possibility of using a small body of Arnhem Land natives for infiltration and reconnaissance in the islands of the Malay Peninsula was contemplated.
- 25 That the natives of Arnhem Land are peculiarly fitted for service in this area to the Northward is apparent. They have had long contact with the Malays from Timor and Macassar who were accustomed to visit them each year....
- 26 The natives have a tradition of respect for the Malays and many of the old men can still speak Malay. They state that many of their number visited Timor and Macassar with the Malays, returning to their own country with the return of the Malays in the following year.
- 27 It is not suggested that large numbers such as would depopulate their own country should be enlisted, but merely that a small body consisting of, say, one section, might be in emergency perform valuable service in the Malay Archipelago, in conjunction with Independent Companies. [p14] They would quickly establish themselves on a friendly footing among the native population, and once they had been landed and had dispersed in an area which it has intended to infiltrate or attack, their presence would not be easily detected by the Japanese intelligence in a situation where the presence of even a single European stranger would be very conspicuous, and would arouse immediate suspicion.
- 28 Finally, it is pointed out that in all approaches to the natives of Northern Australia the greatest care would be exercised in handling them. Contacts with them should be controlled at least to some extent and be made the responsibility of selected officers. Some elementary information instructing in native custom would probably be useful as a preliminary.
- 29 It should be stressed from the outset that nothing must be done which will disrupt or disturb the organisation of these people, especially in Arnhem Land, unless this is made unavoidable by the threat of active invasion in the Northern Territory. In these circumstances, invaluable service could be rendered by the natives in guerilla warfare, on both flanks of Darwin, but the organisation of a small number of natives in the initial stages would be all that is required to serve as a Cadre or nucleus for any larger organisation which might have to be set in motion in extreme emergency.

NORTHERN TERRITORY COASTAL PATROL

Abbreviations

AA	Anti-aircraft
AFV	Armoured fighting vehicle
AHQ	Army headquarters
AK	Auxiliary ketch
AOB	Air Observer Base
AWL	Absent without leave
DMO	Director of military operations
DSO	Director of special operations
GOC	General officer commanding
GSO	General staff officer
LHQ	Land headquarters
LMG	Light machine gun
MD	Military district
MG	Machine gun
MT	Motor transport
MV	Mission vessel
NAOU	North Australia Observer Unit
NAB	Novarsenobenzol
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
OC	Officer commanding
OP	Observation post
QMG	Quartermaster-general
SAA	Small arms ammunition
TSMG	Thompson sub-machine gun
VDC	Volunteer Defence Corps
WT	Wireless transmission