

Darwin after the war

Reminiscences

by Frank Mann

Transferring from the Postmaster-General's Department, Frank Mann joined Customs in Brisbane in 1942. Between 1948 and 1961 he served several tours of duty in Darwin. He retired as Assistant Collector (Intelligence), Brisbane in 1986.

After the war Darwin Customs were unable to reoccupy their office because it was retained by the Royal Australian Navy, and Customs staff were therefore located in a corrugated iron "Sydney Williams" hut, between Mitchell Street and the Esplanade. Between the Customs house and Mitchell Street stood the Darwin Music House, a similar type of building, owned and operated by John Schombacher.

Such was the establishment when I was requested to relieve at Darwin for six weeks. At the time I was acting clerk in the Long Room, Brisbane, in the old Army Pay Office in Ann Street, which Customs occupied while the Customs House was being renovated.

As the collector for Queensland was responsible for all Customs activities in the Northern Territory, Queens-

land also supplied all staff. When new staff arrived in Darwin in later years and told the "old stagers" that they were there for only six weeks there was much loud laughter from those who knew better. Whether that particular transfer "con" was a Queensland staff office invention, however, remains a mystery.

In any event I knew no better at the time, so off I went for my six weeks' temporary transfer. The flight from Brisbane to Darwin took eleven hours by DC3 in February 1948, not the best month for flying in tropical Australia. When I was able to observe anything during landing (that is, when my head was out of a sick bag) I noticed that almost all of the airstrips en route were alongside either the cemetery or the racetrack.

Pouring rain greeted me on arrival in Darwin, where W J O'Connor, the officer whom I was to relieve, cheerily informed me, apologetically, that he was about to leave and was not coming back. The other guys who met me uttered suitable commiserations on the way into town in a "disposals" vehicle. Stopping at our destination, I alighted and was advised in quick succession to watch the puddles and the barbed wire. Someone held apart two strands of wire while I clambered through to a fibro hut about 12 feet by 10 feet., which had "push out" hessian-covered windows in each wall. Needless to say not much rain stayed outside.

Beds consisted of two "cyclone" stretchers, one on top of the other, so

that the body of a sleeping person was on a level with a window, and therefore was able to get some air.

I soon found that the Customs staff consisted of Ivan Honnet Simon, Sub-Collector, K W (Bill) Eddington, Gordon Renew, Eric Mahony, Pat Quinn, Ken Long, Guy Leach, Charlie Sparkes, Bob Mantton, Hugh Sweeney (ex RAN and decorated), George Bergman and Lionel Oxlade, ex AIF Captain.

After waking on a saturated mattress, I went for an early morning walk and almost got lost. Surrounded by 10 foot high spear grass, a city boy cannot see too far. If I had known how to reach the airport I reckon that I would have faced the ordeal of a flight home rather than stay in Darwin that morning. (I stayed ten years.) I found my way back to No. 3 Hostel, so described in Works and Jerks parlance, but known to inmates as "Belsen", a term for which we were regularly reprimanded. The Hostel was surrounded by an 8 foot high 6-strand barbed wire fence, according to unconfirmed reports because it had served as a wartime service women's camp.

It was quite an experience for someone who had not been in the services to have to be almost continually in a line-up to pay the rent, of two-pound-ten a week, to purchase a tobacco ration and to be fed. To this day I am unable to eat rhubarb. I ate it then rather than starve I suppose. Brownish milk made from powder, and herrings in

tomato sauce every Friday whether one was a practising Roman Catholic or not were typical of the regimen. As a further penalty there was a cook who seemed determined to fatten me up; no sooner had I struggled through a serving than he would bellow from the counter, "Hey skinny, there's some more left here".

No imagination is needed by anyone who has experienced wet season conditions to now how warm it was during the sunny periods in that corrugated iron-roofed "Customs House". Fortunately there were fibro louvres the full length of each side.

Generally no aircraft landed during the day, so I headed home to Belsen for lunch and a half-hour crash on the cyclone stretcher while listening to "Blue Hills" on the ABC from Adelaide. We could ascertain the risk of frost in the Barossa Valley the next

night – invaluable information. I couldn't complain too much though as the ABC only transmitted to the Northern Territory for about six hours each day. It was easier to listen to Indonesian music on broadcast band.

Darwin harbour was still a mess, with sunken ships visible within a short distance of a bettered wharf. As everything came to Darwin by ship in those days there was no shortage of coastal vessels, including the popular passenger-carrying State ships from Western Australia.

Aircraft movements were steady and probably the majority in 1948 were Service flights from Japan, Singapore and Morotai, mostly by Dakotas. Qantas was operating civil passenger flights with Lancastrian aircraft (converted Lancasters) that carried about nine or eleven passengers.

Together with BOAC, Qantas also operated the flying boats which alighted near the mouth of Frances Bay. The boats did not fly overnight and Darwin was the end of the leg from Bowen or Surabaya.

Flights would arrive in Darwin at all hours of the night. Customs staff transport consisted of a "disposals" jeep which didn't have the comfort of disc curtains (the one sedan available was the Sub-Collector's transport, and used by others only for emergencies). Driving to the airport during an evening storm was something to be experienced. Some of the Customs staff (three or four I think) lived in the RAAF Sergeants' quarters at the airport, so there was always someone on hand for those unexpected arrivals.

Source:
Australian Customs History Journal,
Number 1 June 1989.

Staff at Customs House, Darwin, 1948.



AUSTRALIAN CUSTOMS SERVICE HISTORICAL COLLECTION, DARWIN.