

Bunker Battleground

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Wartime secret or urban myth, the tunnels believed to have been built by US troops in Castle Hill and Mount Louisa have intrigued Townsvilleans for more than half a century. IAN FRAZER digs into the mystery

BUNKER sceptic Peter Bell and true believer Daniel Hultgren at least agree that tunnelling Mount Louisa during World War II must have left mountain of rubble.

Not that Dr Bell, a military historian, thinks that the US Air Force dug much more than post holes while based in Townsville.

Eleven years ago, when Mr Hultgren tried in vain to get Townsville City Council to back his quest to explore wartime bunkers, Dr Bell challenged him to explain what happened to 900,000 tonnes of granite from the big one inside Mount Louisa.

The Adelaide-based historian was still sceptical this week when contacted for comment on a report that 300 drums of mustard gas might have been stored in a bunker inside Castle Hill up to 1980 (see separate story).

“Why would you excavate bunkers in Castle Hill to store mustard gas, why not take it to Charters Towers, where there was a chemical weapons depot?” he asked.

Mr Hultgren, founder of Australian Bunker and Military Museum Pty Ltd, told the Townsville Bulletin this week he, too, was unconvinced that mustard gas had been buried in Castle Hill.

“We have to work with facts,” he said in telephone interview from his home in Noosa.

“At this stage all I have is innuendo and rumour.”

The facts that matter most to Mr Hultgren might not suit an academic historian, but have driven his 18 year-quest to find and open the secret bunkers he says were crucial to defending Australia in World War II.

His certainty of the existence of bunkers in Mount Louisa, Mount Stuart and Castle Hill -- denied by the Department of Defence -- is based on oral history, aerial photographs, geophysical surveys and thin documentary evidence.

He says what counts most to him is what he has been told by 29 armed services personnel who either worked in bunkers throughout Australia or guarded them after the war.

For example, he has a statement from an ex-RAAF leading air craftsman armourer who says that while serving in Townsville he entered bunkers at Mount Louisa, Castle Hill, Mount Elliot and the present-day site of Lavarack Barracks.

Another ex-serviceman told him of having entered a Castle Hill bunker via the old RAAF headquarters in Green St, West End, through two concrete swing doors wide enough to take a five-tonne truck. Mr Hultgren wants the bunkers reopened and turned into museums. “These 29 Diggers passed away before seeing their final wish granted,” he said.

“All they wanted was to have the bunkers opened for all to see, so they could finally show their families what they did during the war.

“Research has shown that most of the bunkers are intact and in most cases complete with stores.”

Mr Hultgren, who describes himself as semi-retired, was born in Nambour and grew up in Mount Isa.

He began his search in 1991 after a friend employed after the war as bunker guard told him the Department of Defence had denied the position existed.

He suspects the department's attitude could stem from fear of compensation claims for workplace-related health problems. But he says his theories have been met with 'paranoia' by local governments and some landholders, too. Townsville City Council backed down in the late 1990s on a pledge to help him explore Mount Louisa, citing insufficient evidence.

"The paranoia behind this is driving me insane," he said.

"How can we provide evidence when every opportunity is taken from us and we are ragged in the paper?"

Mr Hultgren says his investigation of Mount Louisa and Castle Hill triggered a geophysical study commissioned by the Defence Department in 2002. The report by Coffey Geosciences Pty Ltd concluded there was no evidence of underground bunkers in either landmark.

Mr Hultgren and supporters rejected the report, especially its finding that tunnel portals could not be identified from aerial photographs.

The Department of Defence ordered a review in April 2005, which rubber-stamped Coffey Geosciences' findings.

But rumours of Townsville's clandestine military installations had spread into urban myth long before that, fanned by internet blogs, academic history and environmental-protection advocacy.

JCU history honours student Ray Holyoak found in his 1997 study of wartime Townsville that rumours abounded for 55 years that the US Army had built storage tunnels in Castle Hill.

These stories were taken so seriously that in 1985 a section of the floor of the former RAAF headquarters in West End had been dug up in a fruitless search for a tunnel entrance.

Mr Holyoak said he accepted the word of an ex-RAAF purchasing officer, John Matthews that a tunnel had been in use up to 1969 when sealed because it had become unstable.

Kevin Parkes, a Townsville-based geophysical surveyor, has campaigned for about 10 years to persuade the city council to take seriously the risk of contamination from World War II installations.

He fears the proposed suburb of Cosgrove at the western end of Mount Louisa will be built over the top of long forgotten US bunkers, a claim rejected by developer Peter Tapiolas, who says the site will be subject to rigorous environmental studies in the next eight months.

Mr Hultgren says he is supported by friends in Townsville, such as Jason Sim and Steve Fountaine, who are pressing the council to help them resume their search for the city's missing pair of World War I guns believed to have been dumped in Reid Park in 1969.

But he also concedes that he is scorned by critics such as Dr Bell, who taunted him in 1998 to show what became of 900,000t of granite rubble from Mount Louisa. The answer, he reckons, can be found in the fill which transformed Garbutt aerodrome into one of the biggest US air bases in the world in 1942. How could all that gravel have come from the Bohle and Jimmy's Lookout?

"People are not looking in the right spots," he said.

"Townsville has already lost so much of its war history -- it's criminal, what has been done."

Townsville's major wartime installations

CASTLE HILL: RAAF builds Operations Room for 24 Squadron and intelligence unit on south-western flank

of hill, off Green St, West End, March - June 1942. Main Roads Commission builds command post for army on crest of hill and ammunition magazine, below lower carpark, c 1942. US Coastal Artillery Regiment sets up anti-aircraft battery on Stanton Hill, March 1942. Today, speculation continues about excavation of secret military installations, with entrances through the old Sturt St and Bundock St quarries, off Castle Hill Rd near the summit and through the North Ward flank, off Burke St.

MOUNT LOUISA: Anti-aircraft battery built on summit in early 1942. US Air Force 5th Air Service digs in on the Garbutt side of mountain 1942-43, with 7000 personnel -- the largest air base of its type outside the US. Townsville military history researcher Kevin Parkes says aerial photographs from 1943 show another air depot on the Bohle side thought to be the RAAF's No3 Replenishment Centre. Researcher, Daniel Hultgren argues the USAF stored aircraft and workshop equipment in bunkers in the mountain, sealed in the 1960s.

GARBUTT AIR BASE: Expanded from late 1941, when Commonwealth Works Dept replaced existing, single light-gravel strip with three 5000 feet long runways to take heavy bombers. Other air strips built on Dalrymple Rd stock route, Ross River Rd opposite Weir School and Shaw's Rd. Air raid shelter and 18 machine-gun emplacements built around complex late 1941. Army establishes Jimmy's Lookout and Mount St John anti-aircraft batteries to north and west early 1942.

MAGNETIC ISLAND: The Royal Australian Navy monitored shipping channels into Cleveland Bay from the Port War Signal Station, built overlooking Florence Bay between September 1942 and July 1943 by Main Roads Commission. Equipped with two 155mm coastal artillery guns and two searchlight installations. Relics now maintained by Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service.

STUART: Construction begins in 1942 on RAAF's No 3 Flight Sector Headquarters, Stuart. Completed December 1944, replacing temporary HQ at Townsville Grammar School.

KISSING POINT: Fort built in 1891 to protect shipping in the harbour. Reinforced from 1940 onwards with two 4.7 inch guns, searchlights, and concrete ammunition stores. The guns were relocated to Cape Pallarenda in 1943. Main Roads Commission staff also built anti-aircraft gun positions and searchlight emplacements at Pallarenda.

Sources: Coastal Fortifications of Townsville, Memoirs of the Queensland Museum Cultural Heritage Series Vol 4, Part 1; Peter Dunn www.ozatwar.com; The History of the Queensland Roads Commission During World War II; Australian Bunker and Military Museum Pty Ltd, Mount Louisa Bunker Complex. The North Queensland Line: The defence of Townsville in 1942, by Ray Holyoak.

Timeline

1941

February: Volunteer Defence Force suggests plan for beach defence of Townsville, assuming Japanese landing between Ross Ck and Kissing Point, suggests anti-aircraft battery in Anzac Park.

March: Australian Defence Committee ranks Townsville third most important isolated port, finds defences inadequate, orders two new 6 inch guns for Kissing Point, two 6 inch guns for Magnetic Is and re-equipment of Magazine Is

December: Japan bombs Pearl Harbour, triggering war in Pacific.

1942

January: Senior US officers arrive in city to establish Air Corps installations, set up in ALMF building, corner Denham and Walker Sts. RAAF and US Army and Air Force endorse expansion of Garbutt bomber base, with three new 5000 foot runways and bases at Charters Towers and Cloncurry.

March: Allied South West Pacific Command HQ established in Townsville. US troops quartered in Armstrong's

Paddock near Aitkenvale. US Supreme Commander, Gen Douglas MacArthur, lands at Garbutt enroute from the Philippines. RAAF begins work on HQ in Green St, West End on flank of Castle Hill.

April: Fifth Australian Division assigned to defend Townsville. Infantry and field regiments sent to Aitkenvale, Antill Plains, Castle Hill, Jimmy's Lookout, Belgian gardens and Mount Louisa.

May: Arrival of 7th and 29th AIF Brigades. Staging camps in Oonoonba-Stuart-Birigaba area. US air strength 7551 combat and service personnel, along rail corridor to Charters Towers. Townsville Defence Scheme revised, anticipates landing Cooktown-Cairns.

July: Japanese flying boats bomb Townsville with minimal damage .

August: Four-thousand US air force personnel stationed at Charters Towers

September: Townsville port handles 428,500t of war material, 5500 vehicles, 70,000t of oil. Petrol, ammunition dumps established on Town Common.

October: US 4th Air Depot Group digs in beside Mount Louisa, begins building 11 large hangars for repair, warehousing, plus camp for 600 officers . Work 90 per cent completed by December