

## YOUR VIRTUAL VISIT - 30 TO THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY MUSEUM OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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*The Australian Army Museum of Western Australia now open three days per week, Wednesday through Friday. A COVID-19 plan is in place with social distancing and limits on numbers in individual galleries. Sanitiser stations are available throughout the Museum together with an enhanced cleaning regime. For those unable to visit at present, the Virtual Visit series will be continuing to present interesting features of the collection and their background stories*

### **The 'Japanese' land at Dongara and 'capture' Geraldton 24 to 28 October 1942**



*Geraldton, Western Australia. October 1942.. 'Capture' of Geraldton, during field exercises of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions, by 'enemy' forces.. An 'allied' prisoner in "enemy" hands.  
AWM 028701*

In the face of Japanese air raids on Wyndham, Derby, Broome, Port Hedland, Onslow and Exmouth, the Army's defences in Western Australia increased during 1942 to include two divisions which were deployed on the sandplain between Perth and Geraldton. While fighting in New Guinea continued along the Kokoda Trail and the battle for Egypt was reaching its peak at El Alamein, General Gordon Bennett decided to test his defences. EXERCISE ROBBER ran for four days from 24 October 1942 with over 20,000 troops involved, It was the largest anti-invasion exercise conducted by the Army in World War Two.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Division was responsible for the defence of the northern sector, with 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade having three battalions north and south of Geraldton and 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade had three battalions between Irwin and Mingenew, while the Western Australian 13<sup>th</sup> Brigade had three battalions at Dandaragan and towards Jurien Bay. The division's HQ was at Moora and supply depots were at various towns including Mullewa. There was no Brand Highway or Indian Ocean Drive, so the road through Moora was the road to Geraldton that was closest to the coast. The road from Moora to Dandaragan and tracks to Jurien Bay and Wedge Island were the only access tracks to the coast between Yanchep and Dongara.



*Geraldton, Western Australia. October 1942, Bren gun carriers of the flying column, moving out to contact the 'enemy' during manoeuvres of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions.*  
AWM 028672

For the exercise the enemy was designated as 5<sup>th</sup> Japanese Division and the three battalions of 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade was organized as a Japanese regiment to be known as 'X' Force. On 23 October 1942 'X' Force moved to Dongara where they 'landed' the next morning at dawn ready to attack towards Mingenew. 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion (now 'W' Force) was to move to the Jurien Bay area from where they also 'landed' to attack the brigade at Dandaragan. 19<sup>th</sup> Garrison Battalion was defending the Geraldton town area and port, but they 'switched sides' to become 'Y' Force which 'captured' the town and prepared to fight off the counterattack by battalions of 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade.

Also 'switching sides' was 25<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment at Northampton ('Z' Force) which was to send one squadron to take the supply depots at Mullewa, another to attack Mingenew from the north and a third to harass the brigade trying to retake Geraldton.

As the final piece of the plan a 'commando' group was 'parachuted' into Watheroo to harass communications and maybe capture the divisional HQ at Moora.

Preparations were elaborate with live ammunition withdrawn from the troops, but carried in unit transport, just in case the real Japanese tried to spoil the plan. The attackers were to wear their slouch hats and mark their vehicles with white iron crosses, while the defenders wore helmets or caps and marked their vehicles with red circles. The umpires had white armbands and had engineers attached who would place explosives to simulate artillery fire and bombs. General Bennett had fought the Japanese in Malaya and experienced the Japanese tactics, which had been practiced by the 'enemy' forces earlier that month. Bren gun carriers were used to simulate light tanks.

The 'landing' at Dongara went well with 30<sup>th</sup> Battalion securing the 'beachhead' and advancing towards Irwin. They were held up along the Mingenew Road by 14/32<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, so 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion took over with some initial success and 35<sup>th</sup> Battalion tried a wide sweeping move aiming to re-join the road at Strawberry Siding. However each ran into strong resistance from 2/2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion and 38<sup>th</sup> Battalion and were forced back towards Irwin. Meanwhile 30<sup>th</sup> Battalion advanced north towards Geraldton before being turned back at Greenough by 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion and returning to Dongara to assist. The only success for 'X' Force was a 'commando' company from 35<sup>th</sup> Battalion which detoured to the south, surprising HQ 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade at Strawberry and forcing them to withdraw.



*Geraldton, Western Australia. October 1942. 'Enemy' troops take possession of Geraldton after an attack on the town during field exercises carried out by 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions*  
AWM 028699

After seeing off the 30<sup>th</sup> Battalion advance at Greenough, 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion suddenly found that 'Y' Force had 'landed' to capture Geraldton, so they turned north. Along with 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion attacking from Moonyoonooka and two companies of 2/11<sup>th</sup>

*Battalion* from the north, they engaged in house to house fighting to clear the enemy from Geraldton and recapture the port.

*13<sup>th</sup> Brigade* at Dandaragan was expecting '*W*' Force to land at Jurien Bay and had their battalions covering the track from there, as well as the one from Wedge Island. However, *44<sup>th</sup> Battalion* had previously been patrolling this area and chose a different route. '*W*' Force 'landed' at Lancelin and advanced across country past Reagan's Ford, bypassing Dandaragan and approaching Moora from the south west. They were only discovered when the main party was close to Moora airfield, so *16<sup>th</sup> Battalion* and *28<sup>th</sup> Battalion* were rushed back to defend the town. The exercise was ended before the result of this defence was clarified.

In the meantime the 'commando' group had 'parachuted' into Watheroo where they were captured, but another motorized 'commando' group from '*W*' Force had already reached Moora where they 'shot up' HQ *4<sup>th</sup> Division* and proceeded to 'blow up' bridges, telephone lines and stores dumps around the district.



*Geraldton, Western Australia. October 1942. 'Enemy' troops take possession of Geraldton after an attack on the town during field exercises carried out by 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions*  
AWM 028700

*25<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment* at Northampton had been guarding the northern flank of the Geraldton defences, so when they changed sides on 25 October to become '*Z*' Force there was no-one to stop them. The three squadrons headed in different directions. '*Z2*' drove straight to Mullewa and captured the main supply depots before preparing to join '*X*' Force at Mingenew, which did not happen as they were held up at Irwin. '*Z1*' moved south towards Geraldton but were held back from joining '*Y*' Force before they were 'driven out of town'. '*Z3*' travelled overland to attack Mingenew from the rear, but did not come into action.

Exercise Robber was called off at 1630 on 28 October and the units returned to their previous camps. Although light forces had broken through to the rear areas to cause significant 'damage' and 'W' Force had almost reached Moora before detection, 4<sup>th</sup> Aust Division had held the major part of General Morimoto's 5<sup>th</sup> Japanese Division and learnt some valuable lessons about handling Japanese tactics. The photographer John Faithfull was on hand to record the action and the Australian War Memorial has a series of 38 photos from the exercise.



*Geraldton, Western Australia. October 1942. An anti-tank gun and a Vickers machine gun form a defensive post at a corner of Geraldton's main street during field exercises carried out by 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions*  
AWM 028696

### **References :**

McKenzie-Smith G 'Australia's Forgotten Army, Vol 1, The Ebb and Flow of the Australian Army in Western Australia – 1941 to 1945', Grimwade Publications, 1994

<http://trailswa.com.au/trails/war-years-drive-trail>

<http://trailswa.com.au/trails/depot-hill-firing-range-trail-mingenew>

*In 2006 the letters section of the NSW RSL newsletter Reveille carried correspondence from veterans who claim to have fought off a real Japanese invasion at that time and it took several issues before the controversy died down. As you drive through Moora, Mingenew, Dongara or Geraldton today spare a thought for those who 'fought' to defend the area in 1942.*



Divisional Tac Signs sourced at [http://jeepdraw.com/Australian Tac Signs 2.html](http://jeepdraw.com/Australian_Tac_Signs_2.html)