

YOUR VIRTUAL DISCOVERY VISIT – 79 TO THE HERITAGE STORIES OF ROTTNEST ISLAND



The Virtual Visit series was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic when Rottnest Island was closed to the public due to social distancing restrictions and periods of use for quarantine from March to June 2020.

Now that the normality has largely returned, this Virtual Visits series will soon be coming to a close.

Enjoy the new “History of Heritage” series presented in the Golden Whistler

Defence of Rottnest Island 1939 - 45



Thomson Bay and Salt Lakes

When the coast defence guns were installed at Oliver Hill and Bickley Batteries in the 1930's Rottnest Island became the key to the defence of the port of Fremantle. These guns also had to be defended against any seaborne raiding parties that may be landed to destroy these guns prior to a landing on the mainland to capture the port. To help us understand the ground defences of Rottnest, we are indebted to military historian **Graham McKenzie Smith**, who has authored the text of this Virtual Visit. Graham's summary is based on the extensive research for his 6 volume *The Unit Guide*, tracing Australian Army units in World War 2.

The coast guns on Rottnest Island at *Oliver Hill Battery* and *Bickley Battery* were manned before World War 2 by the permanent gunners of **6 Heavy Battery**, *Royal Australian Artillery (P) (RAA)*, who would be reinforced on mobilization by the militia gunners of **125 Heavy Battery RAA (M)**. Their searchlights and engine rooms, along with those on the mainland, were manned by the regular sappers from **5 Fortress Company Royal Australian Engineers (P) (RAE)** who on mobilization were to be reinforced by the militia sappers from **35 Fortress Company RAE (M)**. In peace time these permanent gunners and sappers were responsible for guarding their positions, but infantry support would be needed to defend the gun positions and the island in general.



H2 9.2 inch gun, Oliver Hill Battery

On declaration of war *B Coy* of the militia **16 Infantry Battalion** was mobilized on 5 September 1939 and sent to Rottnest along with a medium machinegun platoon. With insufficient troops to man defensive positions across the whole island, all island transport was commandeered to allow the company to be mobile to meet a threat anywhere on the island. On 7 October *B Coy* was replaced by *Battalion HQ*, *A Coy* and *C Coy* of **16 Inf Bn** which established their camp near the airstrip and developed defensive positions at Bickley Point, Nancy Cove, Narrow Neck and Thompson Bay. There were machine gun positions at each end of Longreach Bay to enfilade the entire length of beach.



The Longreach Bay killing zone from the East

On 2 October 1939 **10 Garrison Battalion (Grn Bn)** was established at Karrakatta, mainly with WW1 veterans and their *A Coy* moved to Rottnest on 7 November to relieve **16 Inf Bn**. They also concentrated at the airstrip camp while working on preparation of defensive positions around the island. The battalion's second company defended the mainland batteries at Arthurs Head and Swanbourne while the third had detachments guarding 'Vulnerable Points' (VPs) around Perth and Fremantle.

The companies rotated each month. From June 1940 an internment camp was established at the airstrip camp to be guarded by the company which was now based at Thompson Bay. In August 1940 the garrison units were reorganized with *C Coy* transferring to form **5 Garrison Battalion** which took over the mainland tasks. *Bn HQ* and *B Coy* moved over to Rottneest and two part time duty (PTD) companies were formed on the mainland for *10 Grn Bn*. For the rest of 1941 the two companies of *10 Grn Bn* prepared the Rottneest defences while based at the airstrip camp where hutted accommodation replaced the previous tents. *Bn HQ* moved from Government House to what was now known as the Battalion Camp in May 1941.



Some of the coast defence barbed wire remains in place today

When Japan entered the war the two PTD companies were mobilized in December 1941 and moved to Rottneest. In January 1942 the *AIF Training Camp* at Northam sent two AIF company groups, called **Rottneest Details AIF** to further reinforce the Rottneest defences. The map shows the Rottneest defences at their peak on 30 April 1942. *A Coy*, *10 Grn Bn* was dug in around *Oliver Hill Bty* and *D Coy* was around *Bickley Bty*. *B Coy* was at Tree Hill covering Porpoise Bay and Salmon Bay with *C Coy* was in reserve at Mt Herschel and *Bn HQ* at the Battalion Camp. **No 1 AIF Coy Gp** was deployed around Longreach and Geordie Bays, while **No 2 AIF Coy Gp** held a fortified line across the island based on Signal Ridge. While they were constructing water tanks on Forbes Ridge and other infrastructure on the island the sappers of **22 Army Field Company** had defence positions around Thompson Bay. **US troops** were operating their radar at White Hill and a reinforced platoon from the AIF company held a position at West End.

In May 1942 the Japanese lost most of their aircraft carriers at Midway, reducing their capacity to mount an invasion and the arrival in WA of *2 Infantry Division* from Sydney in July 1942 allowed the reduction in the Rottneest defences. The AIF company groups had been rotated at least once before they were withdrawn in August. At this time *10 Grn Bn* concentrated at the Battalion Camp with companies then training and exercising at their alert positions and taking turns to intensively train around Mt Herschel. In March 1944 all battle stations were manned during the Japanese Raid Scare.

By April 1944, *10 Grn Bn* had been reduced to 19 officers and 360 other ranks with only *Bn HQ*, *A Coy*, *C Coy* and *MG Coy* and they were relieved on Rottneest by *5 Grn Bn* which was similarly under strength. They also concentrated at the Battalion Camp, with the companies training at the various defensive positions around the island.

On 3 November 1944 the four garrison battalions in WA were under strength, so they were amalgamated to form a single battalion, to be known as *10 Grn Bn*. *B Coy* of the new *10 Grn Bn* was formed from *5 Grn Bn* with 5 officers and 116 other ranks and they stayed on Rottneest until May 1945.

LINKS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

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<https://www.guildfordanzacs.org.au/anzac/293>

<https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/213280>

<https://www.rslwa.org.au/members-area/the-listening-post/#1536119980627-7a4b1ef7-1d55>

<https://www.wamdl.com.au/Home>

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2729237?image=2>

Corps Shoulder Flashes



Garrison Artillery (PF)



Fortress Company (PF)

Unit Shoulder Flashes



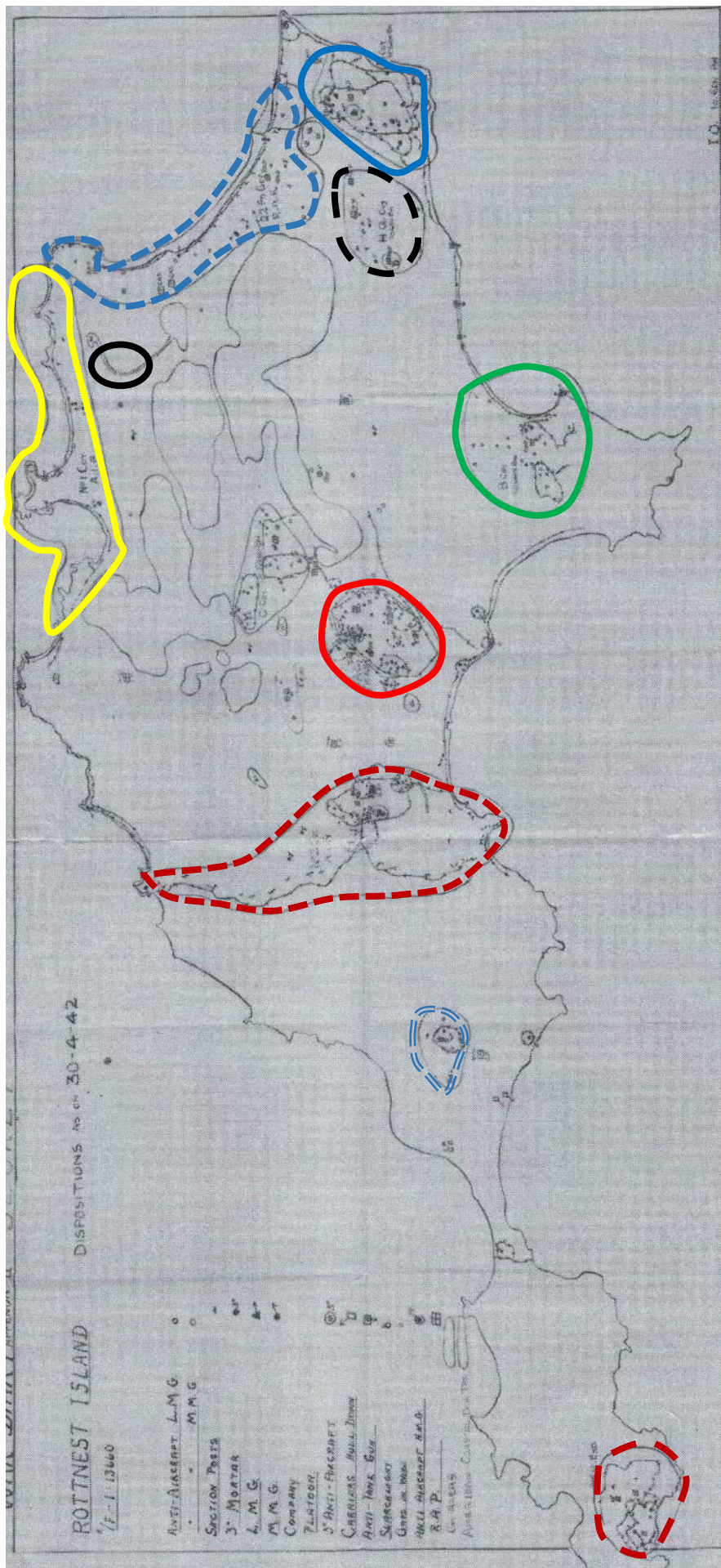
16 Battalion CMF



5 Garrison Battalion



10 Garrison Battalion



Rottneest Defence Deployment April 1942

A Coy 10 Grn Bn



B Coy, 10 Grn Bn



C Coy, 10 Grn Bn



D Coy, 10 Grn Bn



HQ, 10 Grn Bn



No 1 Coy Gp, AIF



No 2 Coy Gp, AIF



22 A Fd Coy, RAE



US Radar Station



