

News of the war

The news of the World War Two came and we learned that the Japanese and Germans were our enemies. I remember that we had a large map of the world on the classroom wall and there were little flags portraying each country, especially the countries at war.

Each morning our teacher, Miss Penry, would move the flags on the map and let us know how close the war was to Australia, and what was happening in England. Like so many of the other children, I didn't quite understand the war, but it made us scared when we saw the flags getting close to Australia. Alice Springs had become a military town and throughout 1941 urgent efforts were made to place us children somewhere safe and out of the Army's way. Families in the Alice Springs area were told to collect their children from the Bungalow, while others like me, with our mothers hundreds of miles away in the bush, were moved to various islands in the north.

On 26 May 1941 the truck set off from Alice Springs with its first party of thirty-eight children. Some of the children suffered from trachoma on the trip to Darwin.

The Roman Catholic Church made plans to take their children to Bathurst Island, and the Anglicans took their children to Groote Eylandt. The Methodists, who had the largest group of all and were strongly opposed to the idea of mixing half-caste children with full-blood children, decided to establish a special settlement for our group on Croker Island.

I remember travelling by road in trucks all the way to Darwin; I can still see us quite clearly. We girls were wearing pretty new bonnets and the boys wearing whatever they were given. We were told that it would be very hot up in the Top End.

Reaching Birdum we all hopped onto the train and travelled to Darwin. Once settled in Darwin we were taken to the Botanical Gardens. It was here at the gardens that we first saw coconuts and tasted the milk. Some of the children scrambled up the palms like monkeys. The coconuts didn't stay up there for very long.

During our stopover in Darwin, we travelled in the Native Affairs boat *Aroetta* to a small Aboriginal community across the bay from Darwin. It was called Delissaville, and is now known as Belyuen. While there, we were told not to go near the Army because they were building a new road. It was on this trip that we tasted salt water for the very first time. I still remember how the salt burnt my mouth and how I spat it out as quickly as I could. I was convinced that hundreds of bags of salt had been poured into the sea. I couldn't believe water could be so salty.

I remember the day we left Darwin for Goulburn Island. As the boat was pulling away from the wharf my friend Netta Waters looked at me and said as she pointed in the direction of the wharf, 'Look Clara. Wave, wave.'

Netta was pointing to someone she knew who was on the wharf. The person was waving to us. I wouldn't look back to the wharf. Netta prompted me again. 'Hey come on Clara, look, she's still there, wave'.

I answered her, 'No, I don't want to turn around and look at her because I might turn into a pillar of salt like Lot's wife.' I remembered the story in the Bible how Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt because she was warned not to look back and she did. I remembered from our religious instruction classes at

school, how Lot, his wife and two daughters fled from Sodom, the doomed city. Lot said to them, 'Don't look back', but his wife looked back longingly and was turned into a pillar of salt. I believed that this would happen to me if I looked back.

Many of the children, including me, were seasick for most of the first leg of our trip. When we reached Melville Island we were told that we couldn't get off the boat because it was a Catholic Mission. So the boat had to anchor in Fish Creek and we slept on board.

The next morning the boat pulled anchor and we were on our way again to our next destination. Many of us were seasick again. The rocking of the boat, the smell of the sea and the diesel were no help to us.

The boat anchored in Bowen Strait between Croker Island and the mainland. Mr Reuben Cooper had his sawmill on the mainland and this was where we all were able to get rid of our seasickness for a while.

When it was time to leave the mainland, we were driven down to the beach and then men had to carry us to the dinghies to save us from getting wet.

This day was the very first time after being in the Bungalow, that we'd laid eyes on a full-blood Aboriginal. Stephen Colbert (who has now passed away) said as he stared at two Aboriginal men, 'They're real black!' He just couldn't believe his eyes. 'They're black as the ace of spades.' One of the staff overheard him and said, 'Stephen that's not a very nice thing to say.' Stephen just kept repeating, 'They're real black!'

Stephen was so preoccupied with the darkness of the men he didn't notice they were wearing only nagas at the time. Others of us were shocked at their clothing, because we hadn't seen anyone dressed like that before.

The boat's engine started and we all turned our attention to the beach and waved to the men who had helped us into the dinghies. The boat then headed for Goulburn Island. It was at the end of 1941 and we were to stay at Goulburn Island on a temporary basis, until the houses on Croker Island were ready for us. There were forty children from Pine Creek, twenty-eight from Alice Springs and another twenty or more were kept in Darwin for medical treatment. These children joined our group at Goulburn Island later.

Mr Keith Wale was appointed as the Superintendent to oversee the missionaries and their work at Goulburn Island and also to supervise our relocation to Croker Island. He and his wife transferred from Milingimbi to Goulburn Island. Mr and Mrs Wale, Miss Olive Peak and Miss Jess March were employed by the Methodist Overseas Mission church to care for us. The sudden influx of people at Goulburn Island meant that the staff had to find food for nearly a hundred extra mouths. Cattle were driven from Oenpelli to the beach where they were shot, skinned, and loaded on the motorboat. The carcasses were then brought across to Goulburn Island to feed us. Some of us were told wild pigs were brought from Croker Island for extra food and that they were kept in pens, until needed. I never saw the pigs, but certainly heard them on occasions.

We attended school at Goulburn Island and in addition to the three Rs were also taught to weave pandanus mats and baskets by some of the local Aboriginal women. They also took groups of us out into the bush in small expeditions to collect the raw materials for the weaving. The women taught us to pull out the pandanus shoots, strip each 'slot' and hang the strips up to dry, ready for use in our next weaving lessons.

In early November 1941, Miss Somerville, the daughter of a Methodist parson, arrived on staff. Miss Somerville said

that she had read an appeal in the *Missionary Review* for six sewing machines for the new work at Croker Island. She had a spare sewing machine so she took it with her to the Methodist Headquarters in Sydney to make her offer. She said that while she was being interviewed one thing led to another and, in the end, she decided to take the sewing machine to Goulburn Island personally. She didn't know it then, but she would stay with us as a missionary for more than twenty years.

On 25 November 1941 the *Larrpan* made another journey. This time it carried an advance party of forty-four children with Mr and Mrs Wale, Miss Olive Peak and Sister Somerville from Goulburn Island to Croker Island. The *Larrpan* then returned to Goulburn to collect Miss Jess March and Fuata Taito and his family.

Mr Adams had the difficult task of preparing to accommodate one hundred children and staff. Under war conditions, supplies and transport were in short supply, but he stuck to his job. By the time of our arrival, the building crew had completed nearly four cottages, though none had floors.

No sooner had we moved in than the rain came: thirteen inches in one night. The floors turned into mud. The makeshift beds floated and most of the children turned their beds into boats and made mud pies.

We'd hardly settled on the island when news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor stunned the world. This was 8 December (Australian time) 1941.

On 16 December 1941, the Government ordered all women and children to leave Darwin. However, it wasn't until 13 February 1942 that a radio message was sent along the coast by the Methodist Overseas Mission advising that all missionaries' wives and children were to be evacuated. The radio message also said that any other white women wanting to leave with them could do so. The evacuation for half-caste

children was to come at a later date. This outraged Miss March, Sister Peak and Miss Somerville and they refused to leave us behind. Mr Wale also stayed with us. There were ninety-six children on the island.

Darwin was bombed by the Japanese at 10 o'clock on 19 February 1942. With Darwin being bombed there was no hope of any boat coming for us all, because the ships that had survived the harbour raid were desperately needed for the troops. The Department of Native Affairs could tell the missionaries nothing. So the staff unpacked and we resumed school again. However, the staff remained uneasy because Croker Island was on the air route between the enemy base and Darwin, and war planes flew over daily.

One evening when the radio worked the missionaries were shocked to hear that cows were being evacuated from some parts of the north. They couldn't believe what they were hearing.

They said they would have liked to ask if we ninety-six children in the path of enemy bombers weren't more important than cows.

The following day, staff called us together to advise that they had received a message on the pedal radio that everyone on the island was to collect stones and make a large cross in a cleared area. The girls carried stones in the skirts of their dresses and made lots of trips to a cleared site. The boys collected as much as they could carry in their hands and arms.

We laid the stones down on what emerged as the shape of a cross. Everyone helped clear the area around the cross so that it could be seen from the sky. Once the stones were laid and the cross completed, it was painted white. We all worked very late into the night. The cross was our sign to the aircrews flying over the island that it was a mission station.

The next day after breakfast we went to look at our work. The cross was painted white and looked very good. I thought

surely the aircrews in the planes couldn't miss seeing it. That night in bed we chatted away, each of us admitting how scared we were, especially when we were told that Croker Island was on the air route between the enemy base and Darwin.

Whenever we played we kept a constant lookout for planes. The missionaries warned us that if we saw a plane with the rising sun on the side of the plane and its wings it would be the enemy, the Japanese.

Each time we saw a plane someone would shout 'Japs' and we'd run for cover. If we were close to the jungle or thick bushes we'd hide in the foliage. If not, we lay flat on our tummies and kept still.

Sister Olive Peak and Sister Somerville found a safe place for us to hide from the Japanese. The hideout was up the hill, behind the mission. It was well located and a large hole was dug into which we shoved crates of tinned food. We learned later that some of the boys who knew where the food was hidden were going up to the hill to eat the food. They'd then neatly pack the crates as though nothing had been touched. The missionaries soon learnt what was happening and the crates were bought down to the store again. So much for the good plan. Of course, the boys were reprimanded for their mischief.

On one particular day I went to Japanese Creek with some other children to swim. We took something to eat and a bag of Rickett's blue, which is an antidote for jelly fish stings. Rickett's Blue burnt the jellyfish tentacles and numbed the pain. The only reminder of the sting is a dark outline on the skin where the tentacles had clung tightly to the body. Japanese Creek was half a mile away from the mission. The creek was used by the Japanese and Malay fishermen to shelter in the heavy storms during their fishing expeditions for trepang or bêche-de-mer which was a delicacy to Japanese and Malaysian people. Trepang is a long black thing that

looks like a cucumber; when touched, it wriggles like snake. The Japanese and Malays left their trademark bamboo wells at the bottom of cliffs to catch the springwater trickling down the cliff-face. The water was icy cold and refreshing to drink on hot days. We used the clay at the bottom of the cliffs for moulding into shapes of animals shapes.

Anyway, on one particular day some of us were swimming while others sat under a small bushy tree close to the creek. During our laughing and splashing water at each other we heard the droning sound of a plane. 'Plane!' someone shouted. 'It's coming here and it's coming straight at us!' Those of us in the water took deep breaths and ducked under the water. I don't know why, but before I ducked my head under the water, I looked straight up at the plane and noticed the pilot wearing goggles. His hand was on something as the plane dived low. I called out to the others 'Oh no! He's going to shoot us. We're going to die.' It seemed like ages before one of the children sitting under the tree came and told us the plane had gone, that the plane was actually one of ours. We couldn't get out of the water fast enough. We raced back to the mission, sticking as close as we could to the trees, and reminding each other that we were to lie flat on our tummies, if the plane returned. Arriving at the mission, we told one of the staff what had happened. We described how we'd held our breath under the water until the plane flew away, while the others huddled under the little bushy tree on the beach. After that incident we all had to stay around the mission. The planes would frequently fly over Croker, swoop down and head off towards Darwin.

On Good Friday, 3 April 1942, Mr Adam's wife gave birth to their baby daughter, Rosemary, at Croker Island. Four days later, we were all packed and we left Croker for the mainland. This was the first part of our long trek to New South Wales.

I still remember our Good Friday service at nine o'clock in the morning. We all stood around the large white cross we'd laid and painted. The sky was so beautiful that morning, it changed from grey to red as the sun rose like a fiery ball over the quiet waters of Croker Bay. There was a feeling of sadness amongst us all, especially the children, after being told that we would be leaving our home, Croker. The place that we had all come to love.

The *Larrpan 1* arrived at two o'clock, bringing Reverend Len Kentish from Goulburn Island and Mr Jim Harris from Oenpelli. They had come to help us on our journey. I watched the sky for Japanese planes, scared that they'd soon come and blast us out of existence. I prayed and prayed that day, that they wouldn't come.

Who could have foretold that within four months of our arrival on Croker that we'd be on the move again — and this time interstate?