



In 1942 Rottnest Island earned the name 'gatekeeper' as the first line of defence from the Japanese Navy. This article explores how much our holiday island changed during World War Two.

ROTTNEST ISLAND

The gatekeeper



Not far off the metropolitan coastline is a treasure chest of Western Australian history with all the adventure stories a boy could ask for: big guns, shipwrecks, brave sailors and stormy seas.

It's an island that was once part of mainland Australia and one that over the years has played a part in a startling variety of roles. It's been a penal colony and a boy's reformatory. It's been a part of an Australia-wide defence system and it has served as an internment and prisoner of war camp holding nearly one thousand people on two separate occasions.

More recently the island has hosted dignitaries, been a recreational haunt for thousands of families, is one of the top destinations for Western Australian schoolies and is a place we love to fish around. It is, of course, Rottnest Island.

Since early in the year this column has been looking at some of the significant impacts maritime history has had on our State. The last

two articles have spent time in the northern coastal regions: the early trials of pearling in Broome and the horrors of the Batavia shipwreck off the Abrolhos Islands.

For the next two months we are going to spend some time closer to home and have a look at the remarkable maritime history that can be found on and around Rottnest Island. It's a shame but so much of

BELOW: 9.2 inches of gun pointing towards the horizon
OPPOSITE TOP: The tour winds its way through these corridors under Oliver Hill

OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT: The Women's Royal Australian Navy Services were also on the Island

OPPOSITE BOTTOM RIGHT: Twenty eight tonnes of gun barrel on the way to Oliver Hill



this gets buried in clichéd articles and worn out photos of the Basin, the lighthouse, pristine beaches and 'the adorable quokka'. There is so much history on this Island it's a crime that it doesn't get more coverage – and we'll only be scratching the surface of it.

FREMANTLE FORTRESS

In the 1930s the world political scene started getting a bit heated. A bloke called Adolf Hitler was faring well in German politics, Japan and China weren't talking and there was an ill-wind generally across the world.

This tension saw the Australian government put together a defense program which started in 1933. As part of this program Fremantle Port was identified as a potential target for invasion and in 1936 construction on Rottnest started. The plan for the Island included two 9.2 inch guns with

a range of twenty-eight kilometres to be located on Oliver Hill in the middle of the Rottnest Island and two close range 6 inch guns at the Bickley Battery near Kingstown on the Island's eastern tip.

These were the first line of defence for the Perth harbour.

The Perth metropolitan coastline was also significantly armed in case of a hostile naval invasion. A total of nineteen guns with ranges from

seventeen kilometres down to four kilometres could be found from Swanbourne in the north down to Point Peron in the south. Two at Swanbourne, ten between Leighton and South Beach, five on Garden Island and two at Point Peron joined the Rottnest Island guns to make up the Fremantle Fortress.

Work also commenced to put a further 9.2 inch gun on Garden Island after Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942 but before the guns had been installed the war ended.

This might sound a little unwarranted when you think of Perth's significance in the global economic stakes of the day but it is a little known fact how necessary the port of Fremantle was after the outbreak of war in 1939. Fremantle was an Allied submarine base during World War Two, housing American, English and

Dutch subs. It was such a hub that the port is meant to have come within twenty patrols of being as busy a submarine base as Pearl Harbour!

ROTTNEST GUNS

In 1936 the construction began after a year of planning. As well as the guns the army barracks at Kingstown were built for seventy two rank and file personnel with cottages for commanders, gunners and married non-commissioned officers. A battery command post and signal station went up near the lighthouse on Signal Ridge. To assist the building and moving of supplies around the Island a train line was built and six searchlight emplacements were also installed on the Island.

In order for the Oliver Hill guns and its necessary infrastructure to be built, amazingly the hill was opened, the relevant rooms and corridors were installed and the hill was closed back up again. It was necessary to do it this way because of the difficulties in digging deep on what is essentially a giant sand dune.

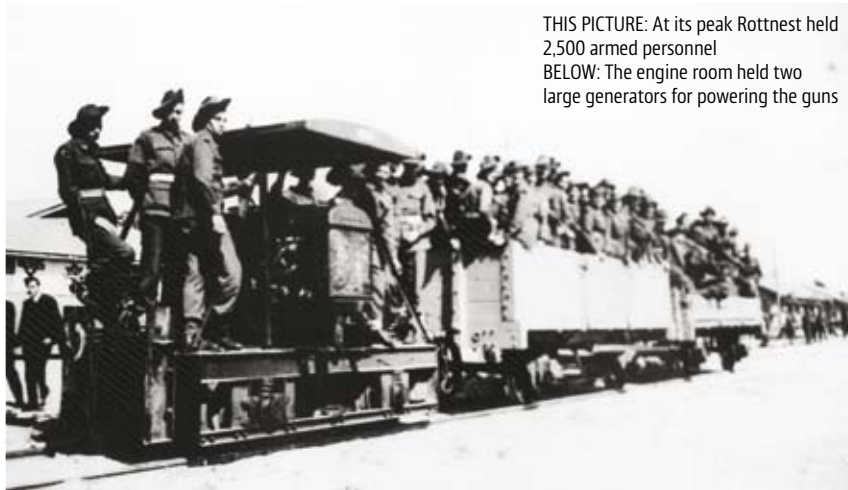
Inside the hill are three main rooms. The cordite room which stored the explosive materials for the guns, the shell store held, obviously, the shells and the engine room held two diesel generators needed for powering the two guns. These could be accessed through narrow winding corridors and steep stairs following down the curve of the hill.

The guns themselves were massive. They were secured by ten foot bolts which needed to be retightened each time it was fired. The barrel alone weighed twenty eight tonnes, the turret, one hundred and forty two tonnes and it was set up to run electrically, pneumatically, hydraulically and manually.

In 1940 Rottnest Island was closed to public access and became a prohibited area. During this time the guns were manned constantly and people from the army, navy and air force were all stationed on the Island.

Throughout the time of its operation the gun was not fired in anger. For practice a screw-in six inch wide barrel could be used and targets were towed around offshore for this purpose, but that was the extent of its use.

In 1942 Darwin and Broome were bombed and if there was to be an



THIS PICTURE: At its peak Rottnest held 2,500 armed personnel
BELOW: The engine room held two large generators for powering the guns

invasion this was the most likely time the Japanese Navy would be arriving. During this time the Island reached the height of its military strength with around 2,500 military personnel calling Rottnest home.

Thankfully this sortie never eventuated and by 1945 the Island had all but been put on a maintenance basis. It wasn't until 1962 that it was decided that using coastal artillery for the protection of ports was out of date that the munitions up and down the coast declared ready for disposal. The Army continued to use Rottnest Island as a training site until 1984 when it transferred the defence sites to the Western Australian Government. Thankfully the Island's guns were preserved because of the high cost of moving them to the mainland for scrap metal and are there for us still to see today.

TRAIN AND GUNS

If this type of history takes your fancy then you need to do the train and guns tour next time you are over on Rottnest Island. The tour takes you along the original tracks built to service the Oliver Hill Battery up to the guns themselves. Once there the tour sets the historical scene for the construction of the Fremantle Fortress before taking you to the restored 9.2 inch gun (there is another gun across the hill which is yet to be restored) and illustrating how it worked.

Once its operation has been explained the tour proceeds into the depths of the hill. This is not a place for the claustrophobic as you now start walking through dimly lit corridors



engulfed by Oliver Hill. Here the temperature lowers and you start to see what life was like working in the Gun Battery.

Each area has been set up to show how it originally looked and the guides point out the features of each room as the tour progresses. The cordite room, for example, was where the explosives were kept. The room had rubber floors, wood shelving and people working in it wore special linen clothing to remove the chance of sparks occurring. Three of the four walls were made of solid concrete but one was made of brick and behind that brick wall a large open area was left free. This offered a weak point that would give way easily if an explosion occurred thus sparing, at least in theory,

After walking into what feels like

the depths of the earth the terrain eventually flattens out and the corridors come to an end. Walking outside and up the hill you pass the air vents, surrounded in low lying trees, to conceal them from passing aircraft. And so the tour, Rottnest Island's hidden treasure, ends.

HISTORY TODAY

It's hard to imagine what life was like when events around the world

necessitated the metropolitan coastline being a suburban defence system, but thankfully we don't have that to deal with any more.

Pieces of this period of history lie scattered around Western Australia for us to contemplate and it's good that these years are not forgotten. There is a mark of respect due to the people who committed their lives to the cause, but it's also about learning who we are, where we're going and taking in the lessons along the way.

Rottnest Island is one place close to home where we find these stories preserved for our education.

Next month we plan to look further into the Island's contribution to Western Australia's maritime history looking at three related topics – lighthouses, pilot boats and shipwrecks and the stories they bring.