

## Chapter 4

### TALES FROM THE FORT

Fort Scratchley has a long and unusual history, as already noted. We are aware of those key figures who played crucial roles in its planning and birth, and we are also aware of its dimensions, its armaments and its historical significance to Newcastle and Australia. However, little is known of those men who helped in the day-to-day operation of the Fort, the ordinary men who kept the wheels in motion; several of these men are still in the Newcastle district. They have a wealth of knowledge, not only military and tactical information, but knowledge that is warm and humorous, far removed from the horrors of war. Many Novocastrians served at Fort Scratchley and their stories should be recorded along with the rest of the Fort's history.

One who had served during the Great War of 1914-18 was stationed with the 3rd Company, Australian Garrison Artillery at Fort Scratchley. Corporal A.M. Simkus claimed some fame as a result of the following incident, which he recounts:

*One hot night I placed my bedding on the concrete within a couple of feet of the 6-inch cannon. During the night searchlights picked up a ship. Signallers sent the message, Stop and give name. However, the ship continued on, resulting in the alarm being sounded. Yours truly did not hear the alarm. The next order was to fire a shot across the bow. The noise was so loud that it was heard for miles — but still I slept on. I was there and then rated the best sleeper in Newcastle.*

Those searchlights mentioned by Mr Simkus were used during that war to guide shipping and to maintain a watch on the port. They were the very same searchlights that guided Squadron-Leader Kingsford-Smith to the Australian coast on his return flight from New Zealand in the Southern Cross in 1928.

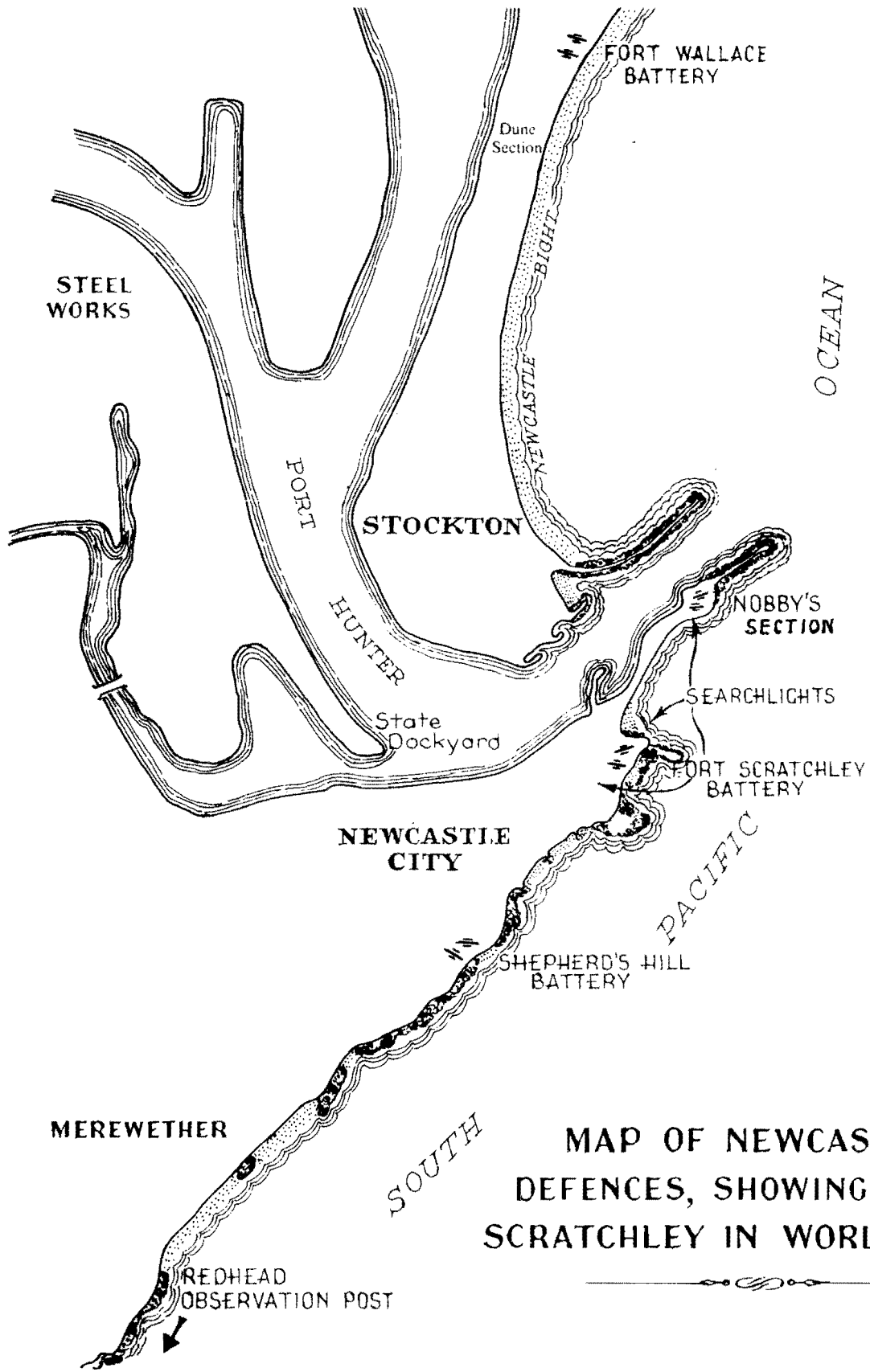
After World War I, the military establishment at Fort Scratchley was to undergo certain changes. In 1929, Captain B.E. Klein of the Staff Corps returned to Newcastle after having attended the Defence Conference in Sydney. He outlined new proposals under the voluntary enlistment scheme, as affecting Newcastle Fortress Units.

This was to be the beginning of Newcastle's

own resident militia, known as the 13th Hvy Bty, AGA, till March 1936; then as 13th Hvy Bty, RAA (M), until January 1939; and finally as 113th Hvy Bty, RAA (M). The Permanent Military Force unit, the 3rd Hvy Bty, RAA, continued to occupy the barracks, this unit being commanded by a Staff Corps officer. The 113th manned the guns, while men of the 39th Fortress Engineers, established pre-World War I, operated the searchlights. The 113th, like the permanent 3rd, were active throughout World War II, while the Fortress Engineers also gave many citizens of Newcastle a taste of military life. The Honour Roll showed several had also achieved fame in the Great War of 1914-1918.

The most significant event of the war for Fort Scratchley was the Japanese submarine raid a few hours before dawn on 8 June, 1942. Captain Stan Newton, the only man to be wounded by the submarine bombardment, reconstructed his movements on that night. Then a bombardier at home on leave, he was awakened by a call to action. Catching a taxi, he was driven to Pacific Street, when the driver, sensitive to shells whizzing overhead, declared in colourful language that he would drive no further. As Bombardier Newton ran towards the Fort, he noted that most shells were not exploding. He presumed they were duds, and undaunted, continued on. As he did so, a shell landed on the road, bounced, and spun towards the hard concrete kerb. With second thoughts about its being a dud, he momentarily froze, and then headed for cover in a doorway. The shell exploded, hurling Bombardier Newton through the air and stunning him. He awoke to greet a surprised air-raid warden. Feeling quite fit, and unaware of a piece of shrapnel lodged in his forehead, he ran on to the Fort to take his position.

Captain Newton also recounted a case where a few Peeping Toms were caught at the Fort. In the early months of the war, the facilities for the great influx of men were very primitive and limited. In the summer months, while a 24 hour duty-watch was kept and when men had to be near the guns at all times, showering was very difficult. Necessity is the mother of invention and the soldiers rigged a primitive shower using the fire hose. Still within easy reach of their guns, the soldiers peeled off their clothes and showered, quite happy in the great



**MAP OF NEWCASTLE'S DEFENCES, SHOWING FORT SCRATCHLEY IN WORLD WAR II**

outdoors. This went unhindered for many months until one of their mates had to go to Royal Newcastle Hospital. Here he found that their bathing procedures were known to the entire nursing staff of the hospital. The nurses were able to watch the entire routine through binoculars, much to the consternation of the soldiers. However, the showers did not stop, and the soldiers always managed a wave and smile for the Peeping Tom nurses.

It must be remembered that during World War II many men came to Fort Scratchley from all parts of New South Wales. Those who came from the West were especially intrigued with Fort Scratchley. The reason was not the military life, but the sea. Many of these men had never seen the ocean, and were mesmerized by its sheer size and character. There was also great interest in the ships that constantly entered and left port. One man recalled by Captain Newton was a north-westerer who was fascinated by the ocean. He was to utter many gems, some of which must be recorded.

The Ceramic, a passenger-cargo liner, was the biggest vessel to enter Newcastle Harbour. However, because of its sheer size, it could only berth once a year, with the advent of the king tides. Aware of the day, but not the time of arrival, observers were told to keep an eye out for her. The westerner was the first to notice her coming out of the early morning fog. Dumbfounded, he was momentarily speechless with awe. When he finally found his voice, he shouted the warning, 'Block of flats coming out of the fog!'

In another incident, he was on watch in the late afternoon. Locals are aware of the beautiful big blood-red moon that sometimes occurs, in the summer months, but apparently this observer was not aware of the phenomenon. When he saw the first fiery glow of the moon rising off Morna Point, he became frantic. A loud yell was heard over the public address system reporting 'Bush fire at sea!'

There were other instances of observers who sighted buildings and reported them as ships. Perhaps the most common error in observation was to mistake the evening star for a vessel — though it was never fired on.

It is also interesting to note how the various forts received their code names. Fort Scratchley's code name was 'SOOT', the name stemming from the Zaara Street Power House. When in operation,

the station's chimney would give off a very thick black soot. With a good westerly wind blowing, the food, clothing and everything else in the nearby Fort would become covered in a fine layer of black soot — hence the code name. (Local residents complained of a similar dust problem when the power-station was being demolished in 1977.) 'RAIL' was the code name for the 3-pounder section on Nobby's. The reason was that a railway track went down to the beach, where workmen loaded sand into trucks for later use to give traction to trains climbing steep grades or when tracks were wet. Shepherd's Hill, was known as 'SHIL', taking the first two letters in Shepherd, and the middle two in Hill. 'DUNE' was the code name of the 3-pounder section at Stockton, which was built in the surrounding sand dunes. Fort Wallace was known as 'SAND', because of the abundance of sand around it.

There will always be some friction between officers and men, just as there will also be happy memories to laugh about. There was the case at Fort Scratchley when the men really enjoyed carrying out their CO's orders. Captain Newtown recalled the incident quite vividly. Besides the soot from the power station, the saltbush which grew in abundance was a very real problem and an eyesore at the Fort. Ordering the men to burn off the saltbush, the CO unwittingly let himself in for trouble. Apparently everything was under control until he decided to speed things up by starting to burn off another area. Unfortunately, the wind changed direction from a peaceful nor-easterly to a blustering westerly. In an instant the fire was out of control. On the CO's order to the men to change direction of their hoses, they turned about and completely bowled him over in the jets, throwing him into the burnt-off saltbush.

Mrs Emily Butterworth (née Pyke) worked as a housemaid at Fort Scratchley in 1924. She recalls that the girls were not supposed to talk to the soldiers at the Fort — but occasionally the rule was broken. During World War II, some Italian prisoners-of-war were kept there. They wore bright red prison suits, and later khaki, and were often taken outside the Fort in trucks to work, and to visit churches. Apparently they were visited by local residents from time to time, as they proved to be no security problem. They came from all walks of life. Mr Kevin Laffey, later a lecturer at Newcastle College of Advanced Education, grew up at Fort Scratchley where his father was a permanent Army man, and he

remembers them best for their music, their toy-making, their happy and friendly nature, and their cooking.

In most people's memories, the war seemed a long way from Fort Scratchley.