



The Salvation Army helps out the troops Nov. 1943. (P. Tully)

# The Territory Remembers

## Berry Springs – a war history

By Bob Alford

**Once a natural water course and abundant springs winding through a monsoon forest, Berry Springs became a popular swimming hole during World War II, a convalescent centre and a rest area for servicemen. It is now a popular tourist destination.**

Berry Creek itself was named after Chief Draftsman Edwin S Berry, a member of the survey party that laid out the future capital of the Northern Territory and three satellite towns in its hinterland under George W Goyder during 1869 and 1870.

George Woodroffe Goyder had been commissioned by the South Australian Government to select, survey and initiate development of the colony's northern capital, to be named Palmerston, following the rejection of an alternate site, Escape Cliffs, northeast of Darwin.

A permanent settlement at Escape Cliffs had been selected by Boyle Travers Finniss in 1864, a year after South Australia was handed control of the Northern Territory. Travers was instructed to survey and establish a settlement at Adam Bay but instead chose Escape Cliffs despite adverse comments by members of his party. In the event the settlement was a failure, and Finniss was recalled to Adelaide in 1865. Two years later the settlement was abandoned.

Goyder and his 128-man team of surveyors, chainmen, draftsmen and general hands – along with their equipment, tentage, horses and cattle – departed Port Adelaide in late 1868 and on 5 February 1869 the schooner, Moonta dropped anchor in Darwin harbour. Goyder was on the

first boat ashore, along with Edwin Berry, and selected a well-watered site with a gently shelving landing area below the plateau upon which the future capital would grow.

Establishing their camp site on Fort Point, Goyder and his men began their task of surveying the future capital and its satellite towns of Daly, Southport and Virginia. Over the next 18 months the crews carried out their surveys in the cool pleasant conditions of the Dry and in the trying tropical heat, humidity and monsoon rains of the Build-up and the ensuing Wet. In those 18 months they completed their task – the town of Palmerston (Darwin) and its satellites were surveyed and the plans drawn. Goyder named Berry Creek for Edwin Berry and the creek-fed springs, originally drawn on the 1869 plan as 'Kangaroo Falls' by surveyor Gilbert R McMinn, who also annotated the site as "Recommended for Reserve".

West of Berry Springs, Southport was one of the satellite towns surveyed and laid out by Goyder's men on the junction of the Blackmore and Darwin Rivers. With the Pine Creek goldfields in full swing, Southport became the starting point for diggers on their way to riches or rags and was soon larger and more populous than the capital, Palmerston. The Overland Telegraph, completed in 1872, also passed through the township, linking the world via Palmerston to the south. Southport boasted a jetty, a telegraph station and post office, an explosives magazine, hotels, boarding houses, blacksmiths and saddlers, shipping merchants and general and specialist stores of the ever resourceful and entrepreneurial Chinese, including one Kwong Sue Duk.

A herbalist and general merchant, Kwong thrived there before moving on to Palmerston as Southport's relevance faded with the opening of the Palmerston to Pine Creek Railway in 1888. In 1889 Southport Station was opened for the railway. However its location bypassed the settlement itself and with it the township faded away. Southport had prospered over 20 years but by 1890 it was abandoned.

In 1891 a 15 acre agricultural block developed by hotel owner, Samuel Brown, sold for £1/5 while seven township lots went for one shilling each. Only building foundations and the graves of some 60 people remain to witness Southport's existence. There was a brief revival during WWII, when light shipping plied the Blackmore River to land military supplies at the Middle Arm Jetty, but with war's end Southport lay abandoned once again.

Further along the line was Tumbling Waters, another of Goyder's surveyed sites. Located to the south of Southport and on the Blackmore River it was first named after the rapids – the 'Tumbling Waters' – by Surveyor RC Burton, who discovered gold there in 1869. Initially surveyed by AH Smith it was later the site of a construction camp for the Overland Telegraph Line crews. Located on the Coach Road to Adelaide River and on to the goldfields it boasted a wayside inn and a few buildings before fading into obscurity when the Palmerston to Pine Creek Railway bypassed it and the Coach Road – now Mira Road.

With the fading away of the townships the area around, Berry Springs reverted to former days, accessed only by a rough track to Bynoe Harbour. In those prewar days the creek and springs were frequented by local families on picnics and outings before the military began to establish camps and facilities as World War II impacted Darwin and the Northern Territory. Closest to the area was the large supply depot at Firdan, where Noonamah now lies. The military erected the Noonamah Field Supply Depot, to supply a range of units including a number of airfields, while in 1942 a railway siding to service the depot was built a mile south and immediately south of Strauss airstrip at Noonamah, a highly appropriate Wagaman tribe Aboriginal word for "plenty of tucker and good things."

While a large number of army units, including the 148th Field Artillery Regiment US Army, were camped in the area, it was the nearby airfields that provided the focus for wartime activities. Developed in late 1941 as part of the RAAF's Aerodrome Development Program under Flight Lieutenant John Yeaman, the fighter strips at the 27 and 34-Mile pegs and Hughes, a bomber field between them, provided the early aerial defence of Darwin. What also developed was the offensive campaign by RAAF Hudson bombers of 2 and 13 Squadrons against the Japanese in the islands to the north. The Hudson crews suffered appalling losses against the Japanese and were later forced to combine and operate as a single unit.

From the 27 and 34-Mile airstrips, P-40 Kittyhawks of the 8th and 9th Squadrons of the USAAF 49th Pursuit (Fighter) Group flew against Japanese raids before moving to New Guinea in September and October of 1942. Both airstrips were named Strauss and Livingstone in memory of USAAF pilots killed in action over Darwin. Both the 8th and 9th Squadrons were aided by P-40s of the 7th Squadron based at Batchelor while personnel of the 49th Pursuit Group

Interceptor Control Squadron provided tactical information by which fighter pilots could intercept Japanese raids.

Camped closer to Berry Springs off the main track, the site was later called 'Wiley's Rest' in memory of one of ten of the unit's personnel killed in an aircraft crash at Annaburroo in April 1942. On 16 June 1942 Lieutenant Andrew J Reynolds of the 9th Squadron force-landed his P-40 on the banks of Berry Creek near Berry Springs after a Japanese Zero damaged his engine.

Strauss airstrip was later home to the RAAF's No. 76 Squadron and its P-40s, and from January 1943 the Spitfires of No. 452 Squadron before 549 Squadron RAF arrived in late 1944. Livingstone hosted the P-40s of No. 77 Squadron and from January 1943 the Spitfires of No. 457 Squadron and later 548 Squadron RAF. Hughes was home to No. 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit and Nos. 2 and 13 Hudson Squadrons before No. 2 Squadron and its B-25 Mitchells moved in during 1944.

At Berry Springs itself, construction of a rest area for troops stationed in the Darwin area was under way.

A low weir was built across Berry Creek to provide a swimming area as part of a rest and recreation camp and a convalescent centre for troops to participate in sports and enjoy the waters of the popular swimming hole.

Sports carnivals were a popular form of relaxation and a chance to let off steam for the large number of units, at times as many as 50, camped in the area. In 1942 personnel of 27 Australian Infantry Battalion decided that cricket was their game. They cleared an area the size of an oval adjacent to their camp and laid a concrete cricket pitch. Squadron Leader Keith 'Bluey' Truscott, a well-known footballer in prewar Melbourne – and the Commanding Officer of No. 76 Squadron at Strauss – played there before the unit moved to Exmouth WA in early 1943. A charity cricket match is now held at the site each Anzac Day, keeping the wartime history alive.

While local units held their sports days, the need for a rest and recreation centre that would cater to the wider military population was realised. On 24 October 1942 Major General JES Stevens authorised the construction of a rest camp at Berry Springs capable of accommodating personnel equivalent to a battalion of some 900 troops.

Units of 3 Australian Infantry Brigade were assigned responsibility for the camp's construction while Captain Brian Magarey's 27th Australian Infantry Battalion, already with the Noonamah cricket oval and pitch under their belt, was to provide D Company as labour along with various working parties drawn from surrounding units including the 43rd Aust. Infantry Battalion, 23 Aust. Field Company, 3 Aust. Infantry Brigade and in early 1943 2/4 Aust. Pioneer Battalion. In the event of any injuries, 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance set up a Regimental Aid Post at the springs, and no doubt enjoyed the opportunity for a swim during the hoped for absence of any accidents.

By late November 1942 construction of the weir, landings and diving platforms at the springs swimming hole had been completed enough to host a swimming carnival by HQ Northern Territory Force. Construction of the camp areas including drainage, accommodation and roadways continued. A visit by Lieutenant-Colonel AW Sheppard of NT Force on 22 December hastened construction with news



Berry Springs July 1943. (Australian Army)

that the 8th Australian Infantry Battalion was to commence a rest period there on 2 January 1943. The day prior to their arrival saw the establishment of Field Post Office 189 at Berry Springs by personnel of 12 Australian Divisional Postal Unit. Three weeks later personnel of the 19th Australian Machine Gun Battalion arrived for a week's rest from 19 January.

While final construction at Berry Springs continued, more units arrived for their week's rest periods. Personnel of 2/8 and 2/4 Australian Infantry Battalions, 2/1 Australian Docks Operating Company and 21/23 Australian Infantry Battalion all spent a week at the centre, as did 13 Australian Field Company, 2 Australian Army Troops Company, RAAF units, 16 Australian Infantry Battalion, 113 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, 13 Australian Brigade, 14 Australian Lines of Communication Company and 2/13 Australian Field Ambulance, among many other units.

At the camp they were able to play a range of sports, watch movies, swim in the springs or relax as much as possible even with morning parades and 'normal' duties to perform. Facilities included a Red Cross representative, a YMCA office, Gardens and a Canteen. The rest Camp offered similar outlets and comprised eight individual camps each with its own water supply and kitchen.

Along with the Berry Springs Rest Camp, three other units were based at the springs; Australian Army Canteens Service provided amenities for the troops, No. 108 Convalescent Depot accommodated recovering medical cases and 18 Aust. Personnel Staging Camp provided accommodation for newly arriving or departing troops. Both the Convalescent Depot and Staging Camp had been established by mid-1943, the Convalescent Depot in June and the Staging Camp in July. A year later the RAAF's No. 7 Medical Rehabilitation Unit moved in during August 1944 and remained following the end of WWII.

Following war's end the combined facilities were surveyed and put up for the postwar auctions of military camps and infrastructure. The Convalescent Camp comprising some 130 structures including furniture, stoves and refrigerators was sold to PA Rawlings of Darwin for £330 while the Rest Camp and its water reticulation piping went to the Good Brothers of Darwin for £1133.

Further to the southwest on the old Southport Road and close to the old Southport railway station site, No. 224 RAAF Radar Station was constructed during 1943. One of eight Advanced Chain Overseas (ACO) radar stations established by No. 44 Radar Wing, the site became

operational on 15 June 1944. The station comprised two radar towers, each constructed of timber, and its radar operators provided flight information to the Fighter Sector at Berrimah. Its High Frequency (HF) band provided better coverage than the normal VHF sets and was also useful in directing aircraft lost or during bad weather. The unit remained operational until war's end, when the structures were sold at auction.

Following WWII, Berry Springs reverted to a place where local families from Darwin and the region could enjoy a swim in the springs or a picnic in the grounds developed by the military. For many years it was a popular spot maintained by the NT Conservation Commission before its potential as a fully developed tourist destination was recognised in the late 1980s. The Northern Territory Government set about developing an adjacent 400 hectare site to Berry Springs and in 1989 the Territory Wildlife Park was opened.

Situated in an area of natural bushland, the park contains representative native animals and plants of the Northern Territory, with an emphasis on the Top End tropical monsoon forest environments through three habitats, the woodland, wetland and monsoon vine forests. Their conservation is ensured through research and public education programs. The Park features a walk-through aquarium, crocodile tank, nocturnal house, fauna houses, a walk-through aviary and the popular Flight Deck and its displays of raptors – birds of prey.

From a remote series of springs set in a meandering creek, the adjacent Berry Springs Recreation Reserve and wildlife park is now one of the most popular venues for tourists and locals alike.

*Raised in rural Victoria Bob Alford's interest in aviation stems from his father's involvement in early aviation and membership of the Victorian Aero Club in the 1930s, and the proximity of an active aerodrome near the family property, where Bob took gliding lessons and cadged flights in various aircraft types.*

*Bob served in the army briefly before joining the RAAF as an Armourer, serving 20 years in a variety of postings, including SE Asia. Following retirement in 1986 Bob and his family settled in Darwin where he undertook the location and documentation of aircraft crash sites and military sites throughout the Northern Territory. He wrote Darwin's Air War in 1991, followed it with an expanded version in 2010 and wrote Japanese Air Forces in the NWA 1942-1945 in 2011. He has also written many papers and has provided detailed historical information to a range of authors and organisations.*

*This is his story on Berry Springs.*