

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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NORTHERN TERRITORY SPECIAL RECONNAISSANCE UNIT

In mid-1941 Australia faced a difficult defence conundrum, with an increasingly aggressive Japan threatening conflict in the Pacific at the same time that Australia's military resources were heavily committed to a war in Europe. Since 1940 Australia had contributed troops and air combat squadrons to the forces garrisoning the British naval base at Singapore, as a hedge against any expansionist Japanese move into the Asia-Pacific region. Attention was also being directed to developing Australia's home defences.

As early as 1940, the importance of the sea approaches to Darwin had been recognised, both in terms of the city's defence and the continued logistics supply to the elements of the defence forces stationed there. The RAAF had constructed a series of airfields along Darwin's flanks to extend air cover over the shipping lanes and enable greater reconnaissance over the northern approaches to Darwin. Many of these were so isolated, however, that if one was to be captured by the Japanese, that fact could conceivably go unnoticed for days. There was no such thing as an Airfield Defence Squadron at the time, and most remote airfields had a presence of only two or three airmen.

East Arnhem Land, with a coastline some 1600km long, was a particularly sensitive area with lightly manned airfields at Milingimbi and Groote Eylandt.

Into this climate of apprehension and uncertainty, a novel solution to coastline surveillance was proposed by a junior RAAF officer, Flight Lieutenant Donald Thomson, in the course of a lecture he gave to a group of senior officers of all three services at Melbourne's Victoria Barracks on 11 June 1941. Thomson was not a Defence regular, having only come into RAAF uniform in January 1940. In civilian life he was an anthropologist and zoologist, and had recently returned from research at Cambridge, England. He had also spent a considerable amount of time with indigenous communities in Cape York in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1935-37, the Commonwealth Government had commissioned him to establish friendly relations with

the native people of East Arnhem Land after a serious incident in 1932 involving killings of a Japanese pearler crew and a Northern Territory policeman. Much of his war service so far had been spent with No. 11 Squadron at Port Moresby, where he was involved in helping to establish a coastwatch network in the Solomon Islands, and at Air Force Headquarters in Melbourne, observing and reporting on the training of Independent Companies.



*WgCDR Donald Thomson, 1943,
by FLTLT Vernon Jones
(State Library of Victoria)*

In his lecture titled 'Arnhem Land and the Native Tribes Who Inhabit That Area', Thomson raised concerns about the influence that attacking Japanese forces could potentially have among the Aborigines of Arnhem Land and recommended that prior contact be made with them to neutralise any such effect. He even suggested that the indigenous peoples could be organised to form a coast-watching system. As a result of his lecture, an ambitious and radical plan was conceived whereby employees on pastoral properties and local police personnel would form the basis of a volunteer guerrilla force in conjunction with the Aboriginal coast-watch network which Thomson had suggested. The Army's director of

Special Operations, a Lieutenant Colonel Scott, became convinced that Thomson (promoted Squadron Leader in August) was the only man who could raise an indigenous unit and arranged to have him seconded to the Army.

On 12 February 1942—with war in the Pacific already two months old—Thomson left Darwin aboard the 43-tonne ketch *Aroetta* headed east for Arnhem Land to begin recruiting for the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU). Among his eight-man crew was an Aboriginal named Raiwalla from the Glyde River area, who was a fine hunter renowned throughout East Arnhem Land as a one-on-one spear fighter. With his assistance, Thomson found willing allies in two of the most respected and influential tribal leaders in East Arnhem Land: Bindjarpuma from the Arnhem Bay area, and Wonggu from Caledon Bay.

The NTSRU was organised along tribal lines into three sections led by Raiwalla, Bindjarpuma and Natjialma, one of Wonggu's sons. Each section was trained in reconnaissance, harassing and ambush tactics. No members were trained with rifles except for Raiwalla, the only enlisted man in the NTSRU, but they were instructed in the manufacture and use of Molotov Cocktails. The reason for not providing modern arms to the units was that Thomson feared that equipping the NTSRU in such a way would make the unit a target of the Japanese and he wanted it to remain inconspicuous. In any case, he believed that, even equipped with just traditional weapons and Molotov Cocktails, the unit could be effective in attacking small Japanese parties while leaving larger parties for conventional forces. The primary role of the NTSRU should be reconnaissance, and as an early warning system should the airfields come under threat.



Thomson training NTSRU how to attack Japanese machine-gun posts

Unfortunately for Thomson's plans, the Japanese air raids which began against Darwin and other military targets across the Top End from 19 February gave rise to a new and rival body. Interestingly, this organisation—the North Australia Observer Unit (NAOU, or 'Nackeroos' as they became known)—was under command of another anthropologist, Major William Stanner. Responsibility for early warning fell increasingly to Stanner's outfit, and in April 1943 the NTSRU was disbanded. Although its life was brief, the NTSRU remains one of the most remarkable units to have served in the defence of Australia. Though the RAAF airfields in the Top End were considered essential to the defence of Darwin, their self-defence from ground attack presented a problem that had not been

fully considered before. The NTSRU represented the beginnings of the solution.

After promotion to Wing Commander, Thomson went on to lead expeditions into Japanese-occupied Dutch New Guinea until a native attack on the second of these resulted in him suffering severe wounds which led to his discharge from the RAAF in October 1944; he was appointed OBE in 1945. During his time in command of the NTSRU he had recommended both Raiwalla and Natjialma for commendations, but it was not until 1992 that members of the unit received official recognition including medals and back-pay for their selfless service.

Turf Wars

For the period that the existence of the NTSRU and NAOU overlapped, the rivalry between the two units was frequently unfriendly—especially in matters of territory. At one point, a party of Nackeroos opened fire on the *Aroetta* as it made its way up the Roper River at night, claiming to believe that it *might* be Japanese. A bullet took a chip out the boat and a wood splinter embedded itself in the shoulder of one of the indigenous crew. The *Aroetta* reportedly stopped so fast that "there were skid marks in the water for days." Thomson complained to Major General J.E.S. Stevens, commander of Northern Territory Force, but no action was taken. The Nackeroos followed up by firing on another friendly vessel, the 83-tonne *Leisha*, just a few months later

- *Creation of bases to extend air power across Australia's north during World War II brought problems of ground protection which had not been previously addressed*
- *Forming local Aborigines into the NTSRU represented one of the first efforts to provide for airfield defence*
- *Thomson's attempt to utilise indigenous warriors' inherent military skills provides an excellent example of adapting to an environment and making effective use of available resources*



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