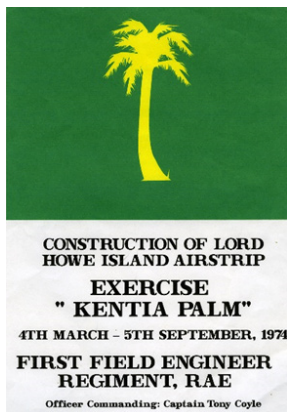


## ISLAND INTEL - BLAST FROM THE PAST

### A Pictorial Sequence of the Events as described in the "Bumpy Ballad of the Airstrip"



Operation "Kentia Palm".



Captain Tony Coyle consults with Deputy Superintendent, Les King.



Gary Barker on the theodolite.



Terry Melbin under a damaged 'Beachcomber'.



LCHs deliver heavy equipment & supplies - 3 March, '74.



Machinery used to form the airstrip.



The troops from the First Field Regiment, Army Engineers, arrive 4 March.



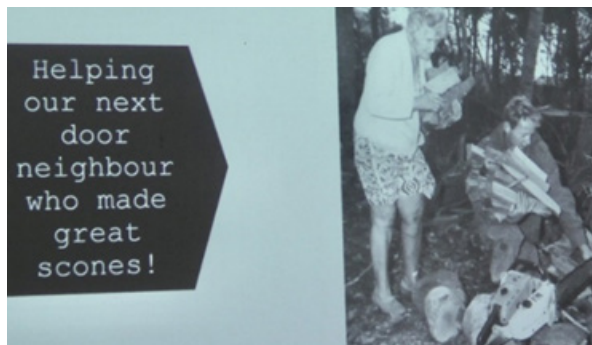
Catering at Leanda Lei.



## ISLAND INTEL - BLAST FROM THE PAST



Jean Brierley's house is relocated – 29 March '74.



Agnes Christian with Army Engineers.



Excavation of Kirribilli Hill to provide pavement material for the airstrip – from late March, '74.



Forming of the airstrip commences – 4 March, '74.



Jamie Elliot on D-8 bulldozer - Little Island Rd.



After the road to Little Island is constructed, rocks were trucked from the boulder beach there to the lagoon end of the airstrip, where they formed a protective sea wall against tide and wave.



Blinkie dune is shaved to reduce its height.



Last flying boat carrying tourists–30 May, 1974.



## ISLAND INTEL - BLAST FROM THE PAST



*'Beachcomber' is blown from its mooring onto the beach on 10 June, '74. The aircraft is marooned just north of Cobby's corner & a new float is fastened under the starboard wing.*



*Beaching gear (wheels) attached under the wing.*



*A dozer pulls whilst the aircraft engines are gunned.*



*'Beachcomber' is successfully refloated – 4 July, '74 .*



*Surveyors at work on the airstrip.*



*Progress on the airstrip – May, '74.*



*In late July, a huge storm damages the airstrip break wall.*

## Blast From the Past Special – 50th Anniversary of the Lord Howe Airstrip (Part 2)

By Chris Murray

Dedicated to: The men of the First Field Engineer Regiment, based at Holsworthy, NSW; the navy crews who manned the LCHs that transported vital gear from Sydney to Lord Howe for the airstrip project; the crew from RAAF No 38 Squadron Caribou transport aircraft, based at Richmond, New South Wales, who made the first landing in atrocious weather to "medi-vac" an injured Islander to Brisbane; the flying boat crews and engineers who kept the service operational from 1947-74, but particularly during the airstrip construction period; and all those Islanders who lent a hand before and during construction process, but particularly those who served on the first "Island Airstrip Committee" (Ruby Thompson, Mary Hines, Gerald Kirby, Roy Wilson & Ron Payten) and in the second "Lord Howe Island Air Service Committee" (Jim Whistler, Nick Potter and Norman Fenton).

The official announcement that the airstrip would be constructed finally came on the 26th of February, 1974, after 19 years of on-again/off-again equivocation by the Federal and NSW State Government, and was made by Lance Barnard, the Deputy P.M. and Minister for Defence:

*DEFENCE press release AUSTRALIA, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1974 No. 233/74*

### ARMY ENGINEERS TO BUILD AIRSTRIP ON LORD HOWE ISLAND

*(Statement by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, the Hon. L.H. Barnard, MP)*

*Army engineers would be sent to Lord Howe Island early next month to start work on building an airstrip there, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Mr. Barnard, said today.*

*They would act as the construction agency for the New South Wales State Government and the Department of Transport. The airstrip is designed for light twin-engined aircraft and also could be used in emergencies by aircraft such as the RAAF Caribou.*

*Mr. Barnard said the broad financial arrangement was that the Australian and State Governments would share the cost of the project.*

*Sixty troops would be flown to the Island – 480 miles from Sydney – early in March to build the 3,300 feet grassed strip, he said. The engineers would come from the 1st Field Engineer Regiment, based at Holsworthy*

*Mr. Barnard said he expected that the airstrip, which had been designed to Department of Transport standards for light aircraft by the New South Wales Public Works Department, would take about 25 weeks to complete to the grass seeding stage.*

*The strip would have to have an adequate grass cover before it could be put into full use. It would be located in the waist of the Island, on an east-west line between the lagoon and the Blinky Beach area. This would be the only practical location for an airstrip on the narrow, hilly Island, which is eight miles long, with an average width of one mile.*



*Lance Herbert Barnard – Courtesy Australian News and Information Bureau - "National Archives of Australia, A6135, K12/1/73/5"*

(Unless specifically acknowledged, all subsequent photos used in this article were provided courtesy of the Lord Howe Island Historical Society and the contingent of visiting Army, Navy & RAAF veterans who attended the 50th Anniversary of the Airstrip – particularly Gary Barker and Tony Coyle)



This is where we pick up **"The Bumpy Ballad of the Lord Howe Airstrip"** from the September Signal:  
...The State and Feds had at last coalesced,  
This plan for the Island was surely THE BEST!  
The bugle sounded...the army was called.  
Now no one wanted this new effort stalled.

### **PART 2 – CONSTRUCTING THE AIRSTRIP**

Upon the Island of the Palm,  
The news was in... and all was calm,  
For years its people had been stressed,  
But now, instead, they felt quite blessed,  
The army "Op" was "Kentia Palm",  
Following turmoil, it promised balm.  
A new air link was certainly needed,  
Local concerns had been heeded.  
So the Navy set to sea  
With lots of gear – it held the key.  
Delivered here by L. C. – Heavy  
Trucks, dozers, scrapers – what a bevy!  
The engineers were army lads,  
Good at building landing pads.  
Captain Coyle was in command,  
Tony had the whole thing planned.  
Two Gary's came in at the double,  
They could handle any trouble.  
Barker had the survey plan,  
While Springhall was the admin man,  
But who could make machinery go?  
Terry Melbin was the pro...  
And if there was a shred of doubt,  
All four heads could work it out!  
But owing to that Tasman moat,  
The troops arrived by flying boat.  
When, in March, they did arrive,  
On this Island, would they thrive?  
The weather, though, became the bane,  
From start to finish – RAIN, RAIN, RAIN!  
Leanda Lei was their top billet,  
Would 61 men over fill it?  
But the lodge had beds and galley,  
For sleep, for tucker and reveille.  
At 5.00am all were mustered,  
Uniforms were on and dusted.  
At 6.00am all units rolled,  
Out into the morning cold.  
The first job that they had at hand,  
(Before they could start scraping sand),  
Those Norfolk Pines must all come down.  
But even as they hit the ground  
It was unexpectedly revealed,  
That the runway would be sealed.  
No longer would the planes hit grass,  
There'd now be tarmac beneath their \_ \_ \_ \_?!

**From Various Sources with Much Help from Tony Coyle an Gary Barker** (A short confession: the author had a cameo role in the airport/flying boat saga: when Beachcomber washed up near Cobby's Corner on the 10th of June, 1974, he was asked to be the "night-watchman" aboard the aircraft for several nights until it was safe and secure...)

**Announcement - 26/2/74** *"ARMY ENGINEERS TO BUILD AIRSTRIP ON LORD HOWE ISLAND:* Army engineers would be sent to Lord Howe Island early next month to start work on building an airstrip there, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Mr. Barnard, said today. They would act as the construction agency for the New South Wales State Government and the Department of Transport. The airstrip is designed for light twin-engined aircraft and also could be used in emergencies by aircraft such as the RAAF Caribou."

**Navy Brings Heavy Equipment 3/3/74** - "Three Navy LCH (Landing Craft – Heavy) vessels arrived and beached on Lagoon Beach...In about 90 minutes about 400 tonnes of heavy earth moving equipment was landed." (Signal 10/3/74). The LCHs were *Brunei, Betano & Buna*, which also brought general stores and materials to be used by 1st Field Engineer Regiment."

**The Command** - "The construction detachment is commanded by Captain T.A. Coyle, the Administrative Officer is Lieut. Gary Springhall [replaced by Lieutenant Nev White in May]; Lieutenant Gary Barker was the original Survey Officer; and the Plant Supervisor is W/O Terry Melbin." (The Signal)

**The Workforce Arrives 4th & 5/3/74** - "On Monday and Tuesday members of the Army Workforce arrived by special flying boat flights. The total work force of 61 men are being accommodated at Leanda Lei." (Signal 10/3/74 ) (Army personnel – up to 72 – were accommodated at Leanda Lei lodge which was used exclusively by the Army for the duration of the project).

**Rain days** – 132 (72% of the time)

**Rain days with no work** – 18 (9%) of the time

**Construction Commences 4/3/1974** – "A detachment of 1st Field Engineer Regiment, Royal Australian Engineers, commenced the construction of a 3000 foot grassed strip on Monday 4th March, 1974." (Signal 10/3/74 )

**Hours of work** – 5.00am Reveille; 5.45am parade; 6.00am start work; 12.00 noon lunch (45 minutes); 4.30pm normal finish time.

**Norfolk Pines** – in the path of the airstrip were removed in first two weeks of construction and milled in May and June.

**The Strip to be Sealed 23/3/74** – NSW Government announcement that the airstrip would be sealed – cost estimate \$80,000. Approval for Army to do the seal was given in June, 1974. "This was announced by the Minister for Public Works, Mr Punch, during the second reading of the Lord Howe Island Aerodrome Bill in State Parliament on the 23rd of March." (The Signal 28/3/74)

Another job then came to light,  
Jean Brierley's house soon took flight!  
Off its blocks and onto sled,  
Lucky she was out of bed!  
Right along the beach it trundled,  
A tricky job that wasn't bungled.  
Then over dune to RSL,  
A pint or two and all went well!  
Would Aggie's also be redacted,  
How to keep those troops distracted?  
Would daily scones upon a plate,  
Save her from a similar fate?  
The golf committee, full of glee...  
They could see a brand-new tee!  
Those scenic heights called Kirribilli  
(which were high and rather hilly),  
Were soon to be a landscape flat,  
A 5th tee appeared – just like that!  
The scar, they knew, would soon be mended,  
So an invite was extended,  
To army sappers in the wings,  
Who wished to test their golfing swings.

Boulders from the south were sought,  
From Little Island they were brought.  
So an access road was dozed,  
Under Lidgbird's mighty nose.  
Those rocks would make a solid wall,  
So the airstrip wouldn't fall,  
Into the Lagoon and vanish,  
Tide and wave would both be banished!  
Blinky dune was also shaved,  
So that aircraft could be saved  
From a sojourn on the dune:  
No pilot wants to look a goon!

On the strip, work couldn't falter,  
Those nine-hour days just didn't alter.  
They kept their shoulders to the wheel,  
Complete the strip – that's the deal!  
Then, according to the plan,  
Nev White became the Admin Man.

For dozer, roller, truck and scraper,  
That heavy work was no caper.  
As the job ploughed on and on,  
Of maintenance...there was a tonne!  
But all this needed lubrication,  
So at the Bond Store – jubilation!  
The trade in beer had tipped the scales,  
They made some \$90 grand in sales!

By June the tourists had moved on,  
The seaplane service – all but gone.  
Once per fortnight it would come,  
For freight, for locals and for some  
Urgent workers on the run.

**Jean Brierley's House Moved 29/3/74** – "On Friday the 29th of March, the home of Mrs J. Brierley was moved from its site to a new site between the RSL Hall [now the Museum] and the home of Mr and Mrs B Cameron....After the house had been jacked up and placed on a "sleigh" made of [Norfolk Island Pine] poles, two of the Army's giant tractors towed it all down onto the beach and along Lagoon Beach...and up over the bank... into its new site." (The Signal 18/4/74) (The RSL was a favourite "watering hole" for the locals and army.)

**Agnes Christian's House** – There was never any intention to remove Aggie's house, but her fresh scones for the troops were gratefully repaid with firewood cut and split from trees cleared for the airstrip.

**Kirribilli Hill** – "...it is anticipated that trucks and 'scrappers' will be removing up to 2,200 cubic yards of soil from 'Kirribilli' to the airport site." (The Signal 28/3/74)

**Army Invited to Play Golf** – An invitation has been extended to the Army golfers to join in a Pairs Stableford event for trophies... "(The Signal 8/3/74)

**Little Island** – "The road being constructed by the Army to 'Little Island' (at the foot of Mt Lidgbird) has reached the site and hundreds of tons of rock are being stockpiled...the rock will be transported by truck to the north-western (Lagoon) end of the strip where a wall some 600 feet long will be constructed to retain the end of the strip. The wall will extend into the Lagoon beyond the low water mark...The Rock retaining wall will be about 15 feet high" (The Signal 31/5/74)

**Blinky Beach** – "The main work has been at the Blinky end of the strip...the top soil from the Blinky end...has been stockpiled (for future spreading for grassing purposes)." (The Signal 28/3/74) "The Army have removed a portion of the sandbank at the south-eastern (Blinky Beach) end of the strip. No more of the bank is to be removed." (The Signal 31/5/74).

**Equipment Used in Construction** – Heavy machinery used – International Scrapers (6 X E211s); 2 Front End Loaders (Cat 966B wheeled front end loader & 955K tracked front end loader), Dozers (four D-8s; one D6); Forklift (Cat 966B); two Cat 12 graders; 8 X 5 ton International trucks; 5 rollers (two 10,000lb vibrating sheepsfoot rollers, 25,000lb, 40,000lb & 80,000lb); M113 Armoured personal recovery carrier. Drilling rig, Forest Mill Saw.

**Liquor Store Sales** – "During 1975 the sales of liquor at the Island's Liquor Store totalled \$72,202. This was considerably less than the total for 1974, which was \$89,866... (The Army building the airstrip thirsty work???)" (The Signal 2/3/76)

**30/5/74** – Last commercial flying boat service carrying tourists.

## ISLAND INTEL - BLAST FROM THE PAST

Then, June 10, when one was moored,  
It broke its tether while we snored!  
It blew onto the beach near "Cobby's",  
(But as the Island had no "bobbies",  
The author of this epic verse,  
Was asked to sleep aboard and nurse  
The flying boat night after night,  
So "souvenirs" would not take flight!)  
Salvage started right away,  
With the dawning of the day,  
The wounded bird was pulled up high,  
'Twas sad enough to make you cry!  
A wing was down, one float had snapped,  
Inside the hull the ocean lapped.  
But engineers were soon flown in,  
So restoration could begin.  
Slowly damage was repaired,  
So, by July, all were prepared:  
A tractor tugged, four engines roared,  
The seaplane crew were all aboard.  
On landing gear, the plane inched forward,  
Soon in water – safely moored!  
Then off to Sydney, it made haste,  
For 'nip-and-tuck' at seaplane base.  
Shortly to be sold to fly,  
Across a Caribbean sky.

All the while, the strip was formed,  
Even though the weather stormed.  
Surveyors worked to keep it level,  
They didn't want it on the bevel!  
Scrapers scraped and dozers graded,  
Rollers flattened and trucks were laden.  
LCHs steamed to and fro...  
To keep construction on the go.  
Then, late July, there was a blow,  
So the earthworks had to slow.  
An LCH was really battered,  
And the rocks – completely scattered!  
Some troops left, and more arrived,  
Once again construction thrived.  
But all that work would soon be tested,  
By a call-out... unexpected!

**Beachcomber Marooned 10/6/74** – 'Beachcomber' was stranded on the Lagoon beach in the early hours of the 10th of June after gale force winds and big seas had caused a mooring pendant to break." (The Signal 8/7/74) (The flying boat took just over 3 weeks to repair so that it could be flown back to Sydney for more extensive maintenance.)

**Beachcomber Refloated** – 4/7/74 "The flying boat 'Beachcomber' was successfully refloated last Thursday afternoon after temporary repairs were made to the starboard wing and a new float fitted...and the plane took off on Friday morning and had an uneventful flight back to Rose Bay." (The Signal 8/7/74) (Both flying boats – Beachcomber and Islander – were sold to Antilles Airboats, a Caribbean airline owned by well-known American aviator, Charles Blair.)

**Progress on Airstrip Construction** – "The construction of the airstrip is progressing at a fast rate...Besides the removal of trees, houses, fences, etc the army has moved more than 61,000 cubic yards from the airstrip site. Then 101,000 yards of material has been carted from Kirribilli...and spread on the airstrip site. It is estimated that another 44,000 cubic yards will be taken from Kirribilli before the completion of the strip." (The Signal 31/5/74)

**Navy LCHs on the Go - 19/7/74** "We now feel we are justified in calling ourselves 'The Sydney Lord Howe Ferry' after having completed our seventh trip to Lord Howe Island." ("Army News")

**Severe Gale Disrupts Operations at Sea - 15/7/24** "The Buna... is a ship on which a door opens at the front to allow troops or equipment to land on beaches...[In heavy seas] The door jammed open as the Buna was returning to Sydney." (Canberra Times)

**Gale also Disrupts Airstrip Construction** – "The big seas washed part of the Lagoon Beach bank away at both ends of the rock wall at the north-west end of the airstrip. The sea actually crossed the strip flooding the road area...(a fisherman's marking buoy was picked up on the strip!!!) An estimated 3000 yards of fill was washed from the site into the Lagoon." (The Signal 8/8/74)

**Troop Rotation - 4/7/74** "A special charter flight by the flying boat on the 4th of July, brought about 35 Army personnel from Sydney to take over from an equal number who returned to Sydney on the same plane after a little more than ten weeks on the Island." (The Signal)

**To be continued in the November Signal.**