

CIVIL DEFENCE IN QUEENSLAND DURING WORLD WAR II

by **Ronald Wood**

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Australia was under no threat of external attack before World War II despite occasional scares last century about Russian invasion. Under the Australian constitution, defence was one of the powers ceded to the Commonwealth.

With the possibility of war after Hitler began to rearm Germany and reconquer some of its lost territory, the Commonwealth and State Governments began to plan for Civil Defence in 1937. As most of the functions were already responsibilities of the states, they took over the main executive roles with the Commonwealth coordinating. Before World War II started on 3 September 1939, each State Government had begun planning using its own funds, guided by publications and instructions obtained from Britain by the Commonwealth.

Unlike other states which set up new organisations, in Queensland the nucleus was already controlled by the Police Force. E.M. Hanlon, Minister for Health and Home Affairs, delegated the power to the Commissioner of Police, P.J. Carroll. Queensland Parliament passed the *Air Raid Wardens' Act* in 1939, giving the Police Commissioner power to appoint Wardens, who could enter any place in the exercise of their duty. A central committee was appointed with headquarters in Brisbane and local Air Raid Precautions Committees were formed in centres throughout the State. The Mayors of Municipalities and chairmen of shires and their principal officers constituted the committee and with them were associated the local police officer, the government medical officer and the fire and ambulance brigades.

In a letter to Premier Forgan Smith dated 15 May 1939, Hanlon outlined Civil Defence Services in Queensland. The Central Air Raid Precautions Committee liaised with Defence and other government departments such as Main Roads and Post and Telegraphs, as well as private undertakings. The functions were divided between local authorities responsible for essential services such as roads, water supply, welfare and safety; the Fire Brigade responsible for fire services and rescues from burning buildings; the Police responsible for

maintaining law and order and controlling evacuations; and the Hospital Authority and Ambulance Brigade, responsible for hospital and medical services, first aid and ambulance transport.

Following arrangements adopted in England, A.R.P. posts were established in places such as railway stations and schools. By late 1941 most factories and office buildings had their own organisations, although equipment was often scarce.

In December 1941, after the Japanese Navy bombed Pearl Harbour, the Public Service Commissioner, John McCracken, was appointed Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Public Safety. Next month Sir Raphael Cilento, Director-General of Health and Medical Services, was placed in control of First Aid, Ambulance, Hospital and Public Health Services. Dr D.W. Johnson assisted him.

There were three possible forms of attack — air raids, bombardment from the sea, and invasion. Civil Defence was organised mainly against air raids. Air raid shelters, mainly of solid concrete, were built in various towns by local authorities. In Brisbane many of the footpaths were blocked by them, most being along North Quay and Elizabeth Street. As the war receded, some were demolished in 1945. Large water pipes were built above ground to bring water from the river in case of fire from bombs.

In a pamphlet on garden trenches, the government stated that each house should have one. It pointed out that they offered excellent protection, except against direct hits. It recommended the bottom of the trench six feet below ground level, and width three feet six inches at the bottom, a foot wider at the top. It was to be divided into sections, with the shelter ten feet long in which the occupants sat along a seat on one side with curtains to cover the entrance. Nearly all households had a slit trench, often with corrugated iron covered by soil as a roof. Most were not as big or as elaborate as recommended and many had water in the bottom after rain. We were lucky they did not have to be used.

At the beginning of the 1942 school year, schools were closed in the area east of the coastal range from Coolangatta north and continuing around the Gulf of Carpentaria to Burketown. School attendance in the specified area was optional.

All window glass in commercial and public buildings was protected, particularly those near public thoroughfares. Stick tape and sticky gauze were commonly used.

Hospitals in coastal Queensland prepared for receiving the injured. Dr Aubrey Pye, then General Medical Superintendent of the Brisbane

and South Coast Hospitals' Board recently told me 600 beds were set aside for casualties in Brisbane, one third at the only big hospital, the Brisbane General Hospital on the north side of the river. Operating Theatres on the top Floor G in Block 4 of the General were shifted to Floor B in Block 3 to protect them from a direct hit.

On the south side, the small Mater Public Hospital provided 50 beds. The Diamantina Hospital for Chronic Diseases in Ipswich Road, South Brisbane, was transferred to the control of the Hospital Board, the patients evacuated and 150 emergency beds established. The first building of the University of Queensland at St. Lucia had been completed and the remaining 200 beds were housed in its eastern end. As there were no cooking facilities, a kitchen and dining room were erected behind the building. When senior Generals moved from Brisbane to Melbourne in 1943, Dr Pye realised that the emergency for Brisbane was over and used many of these beds for civilians.

The Ambulance Services were trained in Civil Defence and played an important role maintaining this. First Aid posts were established throughout the populated areas. In Brisbane they were some distance from the A.R.P. Centre, to avoid congestion. In the event of air raids, casualties would be taken to the local First Aid post and the serious ones sent to hospital. I was a fourth-year medical student, living at Annerley. Having been trained in first aid, I was expected to join the local First Aid Post. The nearest was in Fairfield Road at Kadumba Street, Yeronga underneath the R.S.L. Hall which was on 8 or 9 foot stumps. The area under the hall was enclosed with sand bags for the Post. A committee chaired by the local school Head Teacher ran it. Many people had been trained in First Aid by the St John's Ambulance and Red Cross. A number of Red Cross ladies were on the staff and the local doctor was the Medical Officer.

One air raid drill was carried out, on 19 May 1942 which was well advertised but the time kept secret. The siren went off at 10am and A.R.P. Wardens appeared on streets, vehicles were stopped and First Aid Posts manned.

The Australian Army defeated the Japanese in New Guinea, the threat to Australia disappeared and the Civil Defence services were never used. This was as well, as they were primitive. This was not the fault of the organisers who did their best with what was available. Two significant factors stand out; first, that preparations began two years before the war; and, second, most of the citizens did unpaid and unrecognized voluntary duties after their normal day's work, whether at first aid work, making camouflage nets or learning to put out fires.