

WAVERLEY COUNCIL

SHELLING OF BONDI

A Waverley Library
Local History Fact Sheet



When World War II broke out in 1939, steps were taken to protect residents of Waverley Municipality in the event of enemy attack. Identified as a potential invasion point for a Japanese attack on Sydney, military fortifications in the form of iron stakes, barbed concertina wire, concrete tank traps and wire coils were constructed along Bondi Beach and surrounds.

Bronze squads were forced to train in Bondi Park due to space limitations, and any activity on the beach required the permission of the army officer charged with the defence of the beach.

Bathers had to negotiate their way through a barbed wire maze before they could reach the surf by one of two gates. The locals nicknamed this maze "the rat run".

As part of the defence plan, a first-aid post was established at Bondi Beach Public School. The main injuries of patients visiting the first aid room early in the season of 1942-43 related to cuts and bruises encountered with the beach's newly built defences. Despite such impediments, surf bathers still came to Bondi in droves. The Bondi Surf Bathers' Lifesaving Club continued to operate, although surf carnivals were cancelled for the duration of the war. The club made preparations for the possibility of enemy attack on 28 December 1941. Committee minutes record:

"Resolved that a wooden rake and shovel be purchased for use in event of air raid."

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RAILIAN WAR MEMORIAL

01 2422

SUBMARINE ATTACKS IN DARK

ONE MAN INJURED; NO SHELLS EXPLODE

N.E.S. SERVICES IN FULL OPERATION

SYDNEY, Monday.
 Sydney was raided from the sea early this morning, when it was reported that shells from a ship or ships at sea were falling in the Eastern suburbs.

Shells landed in Simpson Street, Bondi, and in Rose Bay, Vaucluse and Woolahra.

It is believed that the shells failed to explode. One shell fell in a block of flats and injured a man, but fortunately, this shell also failed to explode.

Before the air raid alert was sounded at 12.33 a.m. — Sydney's first alarm — thousands of residents in Eastern suburbs had been awakened in alarm by detonations and went in orderly fashion to their shelters.

Coastal batteries were in action but no enemy aircraft was seen over the city. The all clear signal was sounded at 1.17 a.m.

A communique issued from South Western Pacific General Headquarters stated: "An Eastern suburb of Sydney was shelled by an enemy submarine, apparently from the sea."

Blackout regulations were in force and all windows facing the sea had to be blacked out. Marine Drive was closed to traffic between 8 pm and 7 am, and all names of streets and suburbs were removed to confuse the Japanese.

The Bondi Pavilion was occupied by the Volunteer Defence Corps and was designated the Bondi Beach Club. It served afternoon teas and held dances which catered to enlisted men.

A radar station was set up at Rodney Reserve. It was also used as an astronomy field station and many discoveries about the southern skies were made there. The Eastern Suburbs Hospital was used by the United States army authorities.

On Sunday 31 May 1942, five Japanese submarines, including three midget submarines arrived off Sydney. Two midget submarines made it past the anti-submarine boom across the entrance Sydney Harbour, and one became hopelessly entangled in the net.

An attack on Garden Island Naval Base was launched. A torpedo fired at an American cruiser, USS Chicago missed its target. Instead it hit Kuttabul, a former ferry converted to a Navy stores ship, with a loss of nineteen lives.

One submarine was hit by depth charges, one disappeared, and the third, caught in the anti-submarine net opted for suicide by detonating explosives carried on board.

When the midgets failed to return, four of the five large Japanese submarines turned their attention to the task of disrupting merchant shipping along Australia's eastern coast. During these operations, two of these submarines shelled Sydney and Newcastle.

A week later, it was Bondi's turn. Early on 8 June, 1942 a Japanese submarine, about nine kilometres offshore proceeded over a four-minute period, to fire about a dozen shells from its 140mm deck gun over Bondi and into the Woollahra Municipality. One shell landed in The Waverley Local government Area.



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Bondi's protection, the 250mm gun placed at North Bondi in 1892, missed its chance to retaliate.

Official reports suggest that only one shell exploded, beside a block of flats in Rose Bay. The Rose Bay Air Base was probably the enemy's intended target and apart from surface damage, no-one was injured. One shell fell in Simpson Street, Bondi, and although it tore a large hole in the road, there was no damage to property or injuries to the inhabitants of the area. Local lore holds that a second shell landed in Bondi, hitting the promenade in front of the surf club and peppering the building with concrete fragments. However no evidence is available to support this claim.

Once the war in the Pacific commenced Bondi was no longer the desirable place it once had been. Among residents of the Eastern Suburbs the attacks brought on a wave of hysteria. Those who could afford it closed up their homes and headed west to the Blue Mountains.

In September 1942, the Australian Army, on the orders of the American military authorities, destroyed the large concrete groynes that had been built at the centre of the beach in the late 1920s. The groynes were tunnels which allowed people to walk to the water after having changed in the Bondi Pavilion dressing sheds.

The amount of explosives required to destroy them was vastly overestimated and chunks of concrete were thrown great distances. The buildings of Campbell Parade were sprayed with concrete, breaking tiles and smashing windows. Being directly in the face of the blast, the Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club and Bondi Pavilion suffered extensively with almost every window smashed and the roof severely damaged. It is reported that Waverley Council applied for compensation through The Commonwealth's War Damage Scheme, but there are no records to show whether this application was successful.

Images from top:

Two soldiers installing barbed wire on Bondi Beach, 1942.

Barbed wire at Bondi Beach, 7 July 1943.

Wire fortifications at Bronte Beach, WWII.

HMAS Kuttabul after the explosion, 1942. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, No. 012422.

Front page of the Canberra Times, 8 June 1942.

House at 4 Bradley St, Woollahra badly damaged in the shelling attack, 1942. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, No 012594.

Damage at 4 Bradley St, Woollahra following the shelling attack, 1942. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, No. 012595.



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Since the commencement of the Pacific war, another invasion occurred. Sydney had been inundated with American Service personnel and Bondi quickly became a popular destination for American servicemen for rest and recreation. To facilitate the enjoyment of American personnel in Bondi, US Forces took over a floor of the pavilion and the old Esplanade Cabaret became a private military club.

In 1944 the Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club was approached by the American military and informed of their intention to commandeer the club's ambulance room and turn it into a 24 hour "dispensary".

Council records suggest that the planned dispensary was in fact an American Red Cross clinic for treating sexually transmitted diseases, originally destined for a shop front in Hall Street.

When Waverley Council rejected the Hall Street proposal on the grounds that it was too conspicuous, the Americans looked to the surf club. Whether they were aware of the true purpose of the request or not, feeling within the club was that this was the last straw for the American invaders of Bondi. The Americans were informed that they would not be permitted to occupy the club and, on this occasion, the US Army accepted the decision.