



COAST WATCHERS : AN EARLY ISR NETWORK

The importance of tactical networks to air operations was recognised long before the advent of computers and digital communications. An often over-looked example of such a network is the Coast Watch Organisation (CWO) of World War II. RAAF personnel were members of this organisation which played a crucial role in the combined military operations conducted against Japan.

Set up by the Royal Australian Navy in 1922, the CWO originally utilised unpaid civilians to report on shipping movements along most of the Australian coastline. By 1939 the network had been extended to cover most of Papua, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and numbered over 700 observers drawn from among planters, missionaries and administrators in the islands. Reports generated by these Coast Watchers were sent by telegraph or radio to the Naval Intelligence Office in Melbourne, where they were assessed for reliability before being used to compile a current 'picture' of ship positions around Australia. Regular intelligence reports were then despatched to various military headquarters.

Thus, when Australia declared war on Germany in 1939, Australia's first tactical network was already in place and functioning. By August 1940, an almost complete arc of coverage from the New Guinea border with Dutch East Indies to the eastern tip of the Solomon Islands—a piquet line of some 4000 kilometres—provided advanced warning of any enemy approach towards Australia from the northeast. Although the CWO had been set up to monitor shipping movements, the RAAF realised its value in also reporting hostile aircraft activity. By early 1941, reports from CWO observers in the northern islands were being passed to the Area Combined Headquarters at Townsville. Naval and air intelligence officers worked side-by-side, assessing incoming reports and disseminating relevant intelligence and warnings.

Following the advance of Japanese forces through Malaya and the Philippines and the enemy's reconnaissance of Rabaul, the CWO prepared for the continuation of their activities should Japan occupy New Guinea and adjoining islands. Areas that were likely to be of strategic importance to the enemy were identified and observers were pre-positioned to cover these areas. In order to give

the observers protection under the Geneva Convention if captured, many observers were enlisted or commissioned into one of the services.



*Flight Lieutenant Leigh Vial,
1942*

When the Japanese overwhelmed the Australian garrison at Rabaul in late January 1942, several local residents who were displaced by the fighting ended up joining the Air Force and returning to the region as Coast Watchers. Among these were two plantation officials who were veterans of World War I (one decorated with the Military Cross), and a young Assistant District Officer named Leigh Vial.

For several days Vial led a group of Australian Army and RAAF personnel in evading the enemy as they trekked across the island of New Britain, to be picked up by flying boat and flown to Port Moresby. With his fitness and detailed knowledge of the geography and people of New Guinea, Vial was an ideal Coast Watcher and he immediately volunteered. The process of having him commissioned into the Navy would take weeks—time that was not available given the enemy's rapid advance—but a RAAF commission could be achieved more quickly. Within a week, Leigh Vial had been appointed and trained on the CWO radio, codes and reporting methods. The RAAF flew Pilot Officer Vial to Salamaua where he installed himself in the jungle-covered hills only a few days before Japanese forces occupied the area on 8 March.

From his concealed observation post at Nuk Nuk, Vial reported all Japanese military activity around Salamaua. Armed with the detailed knowledge of enemy positions, Allied commanders launched air attacks on the Japanese from safe distances. On 10 March, 104 aircraft from the US aircraft carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown* swept across Papua and made bombing and torpedo attacks on enemy shipping in Lae and Salamaua harbours. Flying Fortresses operating from bases in Australia made similar attacks,

sinking several Japanese ships. For six months, Pilot Officer Vial's accurate reports of enemy aircraft taking off from Salamaua airfield or passing along the coast from Lae gave the Allies advance warning of air attacks on Port Moresby. The reports allowed defences at Port Moresby to be alerted and aircraft dispersed, preventing great loss of life and protecting valuable assets.

The life of a Coast Watcher was a dangerous one. On many occasions, the Japanese sent aircraft and ground patrols to flush Vial out, without success. On two occasions, he remained silently hidden in trees as enemy troops searched the ground beneath him. His calm voice making detailed reports of aircraft movements while he was in constant danger of being captured earned him the nickname 'Golden Voice', a title which later embarrassed the modest man considerably.



Vial's OP overlooking Salamaua, including airfield (centre)

After six months at Salamaua, difficult climatic conditions, combined with poor diet, began to have their effect on Vial, who suffered bouts of blindness brought on by lack of vitamins. He was replaced on 10 August by an Army officer and set out on foot for Wau, where he was airlifted to Port Moresby. There, he was promoted to Flying Officer and wrote a booklet on jungle survival for aircrew. He continued to work for the RAAF in Port Moresby, being responsible for coordinating the dropping of propaganda leaflets, some aimed at the enemy and some at the people of New Guinea.

Vial's achievement was summarised by the Air Intelligence Officer for 9 Operational Group, who reported in August that:

During the period of six months in which Vial was at his post, he transmitted as many as nine signals a day, giving valuable information of enemy positions, and not on any single occasion did he neglect to get his message through, and this showed a total disregard for his own safety.

In recognition of his work as a Coast Watcher, on 12 September Leigh Vial was presented with the US Distinguished Service Cross.

On 30 April 1943, a US Liberator bomber was tasked to drop supplies to an Australian Army reconnaissance team who were patrolling through the difficult Central Highlands region. Flight Lieutenant (TBC) Vial, having a detailed knowledge of the area, went on the flight to assist the crew with their navigation and in identifying the drop location. During the mission, the aircraft crashed near present-day Goroka, killing all on board. Vial's body was later recovered and buried at Lae Cemetery.

In all, eleven RAAF members are known to have served as Coast Watchers alongside their counterparts from other services in the South West Pacific Area. Among a group well-decorated for their courageous service, the RAAF men earned their share of recognition. Apart from Vial's DSC, there were two American Legion of Merits and a Silver Star, an MBE and four mentions in dispatches.

The disparate group of courageous and self-reliant men (and one woman) carried out some of the most critical intelligence-gathering work in the Allied defence of northern Australia and New Guinea. Their reports gave the Allies a decisive advantage in some of the most crucial battles of the war. The principles and values developed by the Coast Watchers in World War II continue to this day in our military information networks. Then, as now, networks and the people who operate them are critical to air operations.

- *Coast Watchers are one of the iconic behind-enemy-lines organisations of World War II, but the RAAF dimension of their activities is largely unknown*
- *The critical importance of an ISR network to air operations demonstrated by Coast Watch Organisation is equally relevant today.*

"Information, intelligence and knowledge build situational awareness and are the lifeblood of effective operations."

The Future Air and Space Operating Concept
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