"GOODBYE BELS": THE STORY OF THE BELCONNEN NAVAL TRANSMISSION STATION

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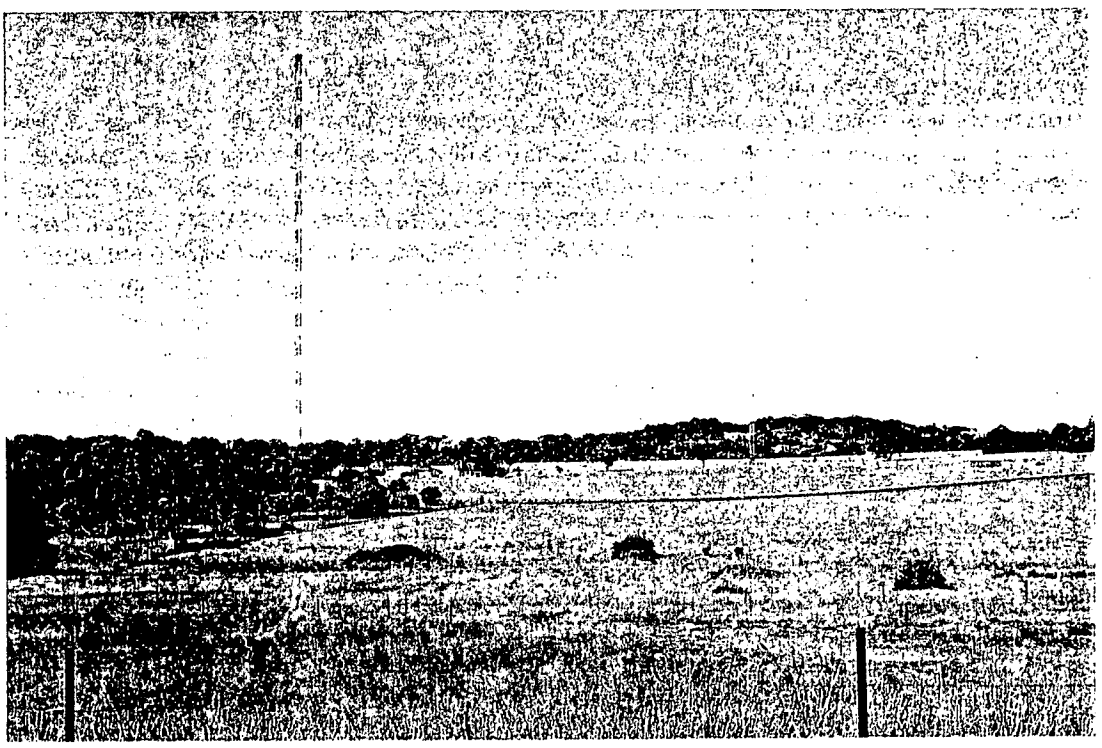

Fig 1 :Belconnen Naval Transmission Station December 2006:-photograph by author.

The month of December 2006 was marked by the loss of part of Australia's military heritage with the demolition of three 600 ft, low frequency transmitter aerial masts at the Royal Australian Naval Transmission Station at Belconnen, Bels, in the Australian Capital Territory. This tragedy past mostly without comment in the media and the broader community. At a time when the Commonwealth Government is providing significant funding to allow for the archeological survey of the AE2 in the Sea of Marmara in Turkey, part of Australian's military history located within the boundaries of the national capital, Canberra, was dispensed with without a thought. If the three aerial masts were located on the Gallipoli peninsula I suspect the outcome may have been very different indeed. This article is a belated attempt to put the military history of Bels into its rightful place in the Australian military lexicon.

Why Canberra? - the station site

The first shore based naval radio facility was established by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) at the Flinders Naval Depot in Victoria. A need for an extended facility was identified to provide coverage of certain areas in low frequency (long wavelength) transmissions. In 1925 the Commonwealth Navy Board recommended the construction of strategic wireless stations at Canberra and Darwin.

The stations were expected to make possible communication with the British Merchant Navy or fleet shipping across the globe. In 1935, the Commonwealth Government decided to erect radio receiving and transmitting stations in Canberra.

Canberra is located 120 kilometres inland and so considered safe from naval bombardment. The site was also considered less vulnerable to attack by the Japanese than other British wireless stations in the Pacific.

The receiving station, HMAS *Harman*, was located near Queanbeyan, NSW on the ACT side of the ACT/NSW border. The transmitting station Bels was located at Belconnen.

The receiving and transmission stations were separated to the reduce interference. Plans were approved in September 1938 and the construction of Bels commenced in November 1938 by Standard Telephone Ltd with the assistance of the Department of Interior.

The construction of the receiving station at HMAS *Harman* commenced in early 1939.

The first elements of the Royal Australian Naval contingent to man both stations arrived at Bels in March 1939 with thirty officers and ratings. Ultimately, the contingent would rise to 200 officers and ratings at both stations.

The opening of Bels was reported as "the base was the most powerful short wave naval wireless station in the British Empire and the largest naval or commercial station in the southern hemisphere".2

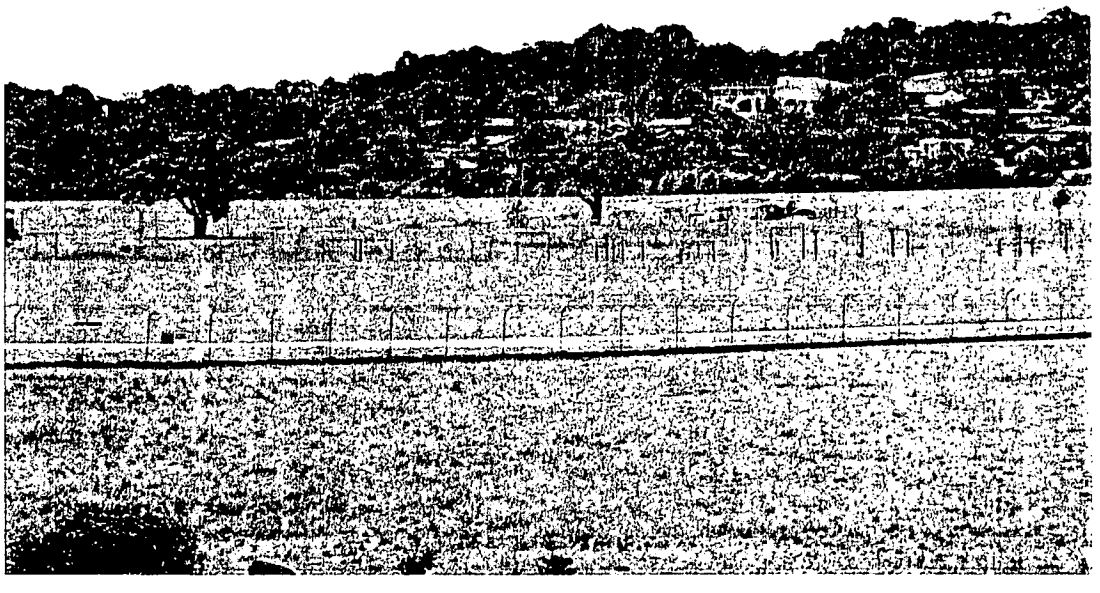

Fig 2 One of the 600 ft aerials after demolition at "Bels": photograph by the author

2 *The Canberra Times*, 12 April 1939.

The station is operational

The first transmission from Bels was made on 22 December 1939. The first transmissions were made utilising a series of Rhombic aerial arrays. These aerials were directional and named after the bases to which they transmitted. The station contained the 200 kilowatts transmitter which operated at low frequency. This was designed to be able to break through the interference encountered over long distances and to be received by submarines. To achieve this three 600-ft high aerial masts set a quarter of a mile apart to support the massive radiating aerial sited east-west to maximise transmissions into the Pacific and Indian Oceans were erected.

In January 1941, the three 600 ft masts were completed. To camouflage Bels it was made to look like a working farm from the air. Small farm buildings were placed about the site including observation stations. In 1995 the low frequency transmitter, Bels 44 was decommissioned.

A sad end for Bels

In November 2006 my attempt to gain access to the decommissioned site to document the three aerial towers in situ for this article was unsuccessful.

It is interesting to note that the only other low frequency naval transmission station in the world in Sweden has been placed on the world heritage list for its protection. Why Australia's military heritage appears to be less significant is difficult to fathom?

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