

The friendly invasion

US Army mess chits of Brisbane in WWII by Tony James

BETWEEN 1942 and 1945, nearly one million US military personnel were stationed at various locations throughout eastern Australia. These were troops awaiting deployment to combat operations in the Pacific, members of units resting, convalescing, and/or refitting from previous combat operations, or military personnel manning Allied military bases and installations in Australia.

The US Army and Melbourne

Many US personnel were initially stationed in Melbourne which is where General Douglas MacArthur established his South West Pacific Area (SWPA) headquarters in March 1942. He chose the Trustees Executive & Agency Co. Ltd. building at 401 - 403 Collins Street for his HQ and lived at the Menzies Hotel. Melbourne was the first city to be exposed to the impact of the American military on a large scale. By mid-1942, 30,000 Americans were stationed around the city, yet it was possible for people in the outlying suburbs to have no contact with them. In the inner city, they were everywhere, and the government loosened restrictions on opening hours of shops and hotels to accommodate the free-spending visitors.

South Melbourne Cricket Ground became Camp Robinson, and Royal Park became Camp Pell. The Americans built new roads through the park and named them after their generals; MacArthur Drive remains to this day. Even after MacArthur moved to Brisbane, Melbourne was the favoured "Liberty" or rest and recuperation centre.

The Marines were accommodated in the covered spectator stands of the Mel-



General Douglas Mac Arthur.

When asked about MacArthur, Blamey once said that "The best and the worst things you hear about him are both true."

bourne Cricket Ground (MCG), soon known as Camp Murphy, and only a short stroll from the city centre. Smaller camps were set up at the South Melbourne Cricket Ground and at Mount Martha and Ballarat in regional Victoria. Officers lived in greater style, often enjoying private apartments.

The MCG became the home for the 1st Regiment of the First Marine Division and this cigarette coupon book, valid for April 14 to May 15 1943, bears testament to the clean living of Private Estip (well,

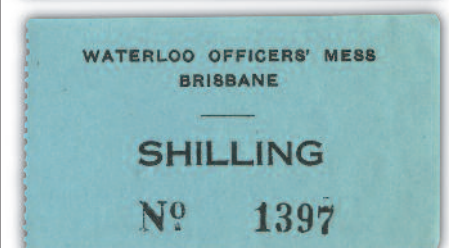
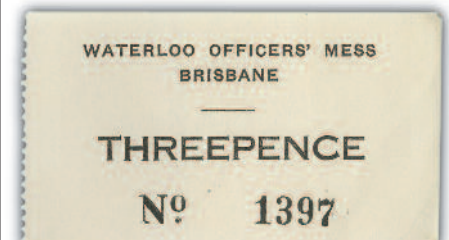
at least he didn't smoke and didn't use the allowance as gifts).

The move to Brisbane

After the Battle of the Coral Sea and the threat of Japanese invasion of Australia receded, MacArthur moved his headquarters to Brisbane on 20 July 1942 and most of his staff were quartered in Lennons Hotel, on George, Ann and Adelaide Sts. He took over the eighth floor of the city's largest office building, the AMP building, on the corner of Queen and Edward Streets for his headquarters; in fact the US military took over many buildings and facilities around Brisbane. The population of Brisbane experienced a huge shock and found it difficult to cope, as their population of about 350,000 increased by 100,000 within a year. The city was fortified, schools were closed, brownouts enforced, crime increased, and many families sold up and moved inland.

The PX versus the Canteen

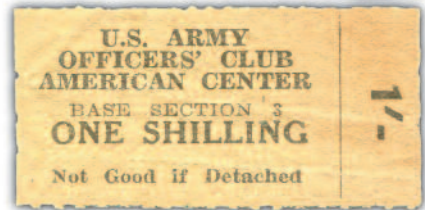
Although the military personnel from Australia and the US usually enjoyed a cooperative and convivial relationship, there were tensions between the two forces that sometimes resulted in violence. Many factors contributed to these tensions; US forces received better rations than Australian soldiers and shops and hotels regularly gave preferential treatment to Americans. The Australian troops lacked the amenities in the city that the US forces enjoyed, the Americans had the Post Exchange, situated in the



Waterloo Officers Mess Brisbane, 3d (beige), 6d (pink) and 1/- (blue) used at the Naval Officers' Club, New Farm.



1st Marine Division Exchange, cigarette coupon book valid 15th May to 14th June 1943. The Division was in Melbourne January to September 1943



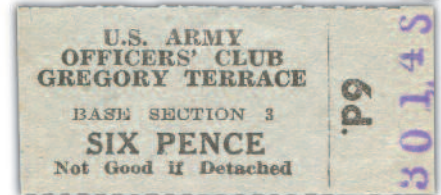
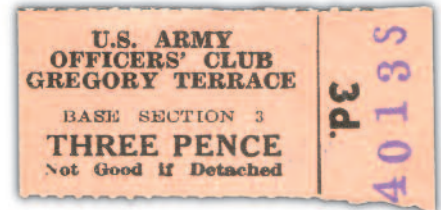
US Army Officers' Club, American Center, Base Section 3, 3d (pink) and 1/- (beige)

Primary Building on the corner of Adelaide and Creek Sts, which offered food, alcohol, cigarettes, hams, turkeys, ice-cream, chocolates and nylon stockings at low prices. These were all items that were either forbidden, tightly rationed, or highly priced for Australians. Initially Australian servicemen were not allowed into the PX until MacArthur realised the unrest this was causing among the Australian troops and allowed them to purchase one packet of cigarettes per day from the PX. Australian canteens by contrast, provided meals, soft drinks, tea, and sandwiches but no alcohol, cigarettes, or other luxuries. Hotels were allowed to serve alcohol only twice a day for one hour at a time of their choosing, leading to large numbers of Australian servicemen rushing from one hotel to the

next and drinking as quickly as possible before it closed.

While it was true that the US military was supporting Australia's security with this "friendly invasion", the impact of the visiting American GI was far reaching. The Americans' military pay scale was double that of the Australian's, an Australian private earned £9.15 shillings for a 30-day month compared with an American private's £17. Australians' resentment was also exacerbated by Japanese propaganda in New Guinea that reminded them that while the Australians were fighting the Japanese in the jungle, the Americans were back in Australia having a grand time with the Australian girls. The oft-quoted phrase describing the American troops as "overpaid, oversexed and over here," which originated in London, was frequently heard in Australian cities wherever American servicemen gathered. At the same time, the Americans begrudged paying inflated "Yank prices", a mark-up whenever they attempted to pay for basic foodstuffs, entertainment or services. American servicemen also took some time to get used to Australian language, culture and humour. An Australian guidebook distributed to American servicemen retold the following account, which highlights both Australian humour and indifference to the GIs' bravado:

"Two Americans walk into a bar, spot an Australian, and say "You can go home mate, we're here to save you". The Australian looks them up and



US Army Officers' Club Gregory Terrace, Base Section 3. Chits for 3d pink and 6d grey/green

down, commenting "I thought you were refugees from Pearl Harbor".

For the remainder of 1942, 96,000 of the 119,000 US servicemen within Australia could be found in Queensland. Not all were stationed in Brisbane; many served in other urban centres, such as Rockhampton or Townsville.

US Army Base sections

Immediately after Pearl Harbour, the Pensacola Convoy arrived in Brisbane on December 23 1941 with 2,400 US Army Air Corps troops commanded by Lt. General George H Brett. An organisational structure was set up over the next four months to facilitate a supply system. This consisted of numbered Base Sections, 1 – Darwin, 2 – Townsville, 3 - Brisbane, 4 - Melbourne, 5 – Adelaide, 6 - Perth and 7- Sydney. While the Allied Headquarters, SWPA, moved to Melbourne in March 1942, a strong presence remained in Brisbane until July when MacArthur again moved his headquarters back to Brisbane.

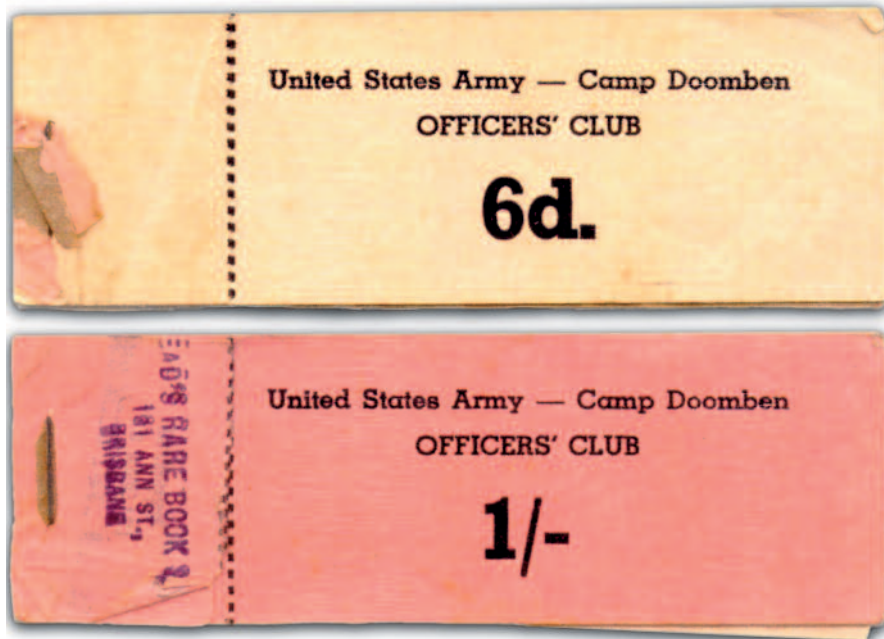
US Navy bachelor officer quarters (BOQ) were situated at the Waterloo Hotel and at New Farm, together with the Naval Officers Club at Oxlade Drive, New Farm. The 3d, 6d and 1/- chits are larger than the army type of chit and are similar to the other navy chits of the period, though with less detail. Another series has been seen with the title "US Naval Officers' Mess Brisbane" 6d (Blue) and 1/- (Grey).

The US Army Officers' Club, American Center was situated in the Old Town Hall Arcade in the city, while the Center was open to all American troops, providing facilities for bathing, shaving and eating; there was obviously a large officer facility there as well, since chit books were printed for use at the club.

The US Army Officers' Club Gregory Terrace Base Section 3, also issued booklets of chits in three denominations 3d, 6d and 1/-. The Club was situated on the lower side of Gregory Terrace in Spring Hill. The Club was part of the Gregory



April 1942. Two U.S. military policemen outside Brisbane's Central Hotel. Image: Wikipedia.



US Army Officers' Club, Camp Doomben 6d (beige) and 1/- (pink)

Terrace Officers Camp of Base Section 3 located close to Camp Victoria Park and apart from accommodation for officers working there, also provided accommodation for officers in transit.

The chits for the American Center and Gregory Terrace Officers' Clubs are similar to those printed for many of the overseas American posts. The inclusion of a serial number – usually indicative of the serial number of the book of chits and the clause “Not Good if Detached” – can be seen on most US forces chit books of this period.

Ascot and Doomben

The two largest American troop camps were situated at Brisbane's two racecourses. Eagle Farm Racetrack was renamed Camp Ascot and Doomben Race-track became Camp Doomben. They were on either side of Nudgee Road near Eagle Farm Airfield. There was also an officer's club at Camp Doomben and chits were printed for use there. The interesting thing about these chits is the lack of detail compared to those issued for the American Center and Gregory Terrace; they have only the branch of service, camp and denomination.

Research of National Archives

The following cable, discovered during research at the National Archives in Canberra, show the attitude of the MacArthur entourage and the American Forces upon arrival in Brisbane. Where Lennons Hotel was concerned, the portion of the hotel occupied by the US Army officers was not completed officially, through the Army Hirings Service. This telegram, dated 19 June 1942, to the Australian Secretary of the Department of Defence Co-ordination, Sir Frederick Shedden, demonstrates some of the prob-

lems Australia encountered with the friendly invasion.

“To Shedden

Defence Department Victoria Barracks, Melbourne

HQ Commandant American Army demands preference all accommodation Lennons Hotel. This action prejudicial not only General Public but also gives undue preference to American officers over officers of AUSTRALIAN Forces.

Other accommodation available with less disadvantages every direction.

Demands are being resisted by Hotel Management.

Confidentially can you assist?

Regards Fadden

*Rt Hon A.W.Fadden MP
Brisbane”*

(Arthur Fadden was leader of the opposition and member for Darling Downs at the time.)

One file noted that the Belleview Hotel near the Parliament buildings, which had been requisitioned for use as an officer's mess, was to be split 60% RAAF and 40% US officers, with the US officers paying \$3 per day towards hiring of premises. It was further proposed that individual officers, both American and Australian contribute to the upkeep of the Mess and payment of civilian staff wages in line with ordinary officers' mess arrangements. Rations were to be supplied free by the RAAF but supplementary rations were to utilise the officers' field allowance.

Battle of Brisbane

On November 26 1942, which was Thanksgiving Day in the United States, the war came to Brisbane, except that it was not between the Allies and Japanese, but Digger against GI. The anger and resentment of the Australian troops

engendered by the American presence with their higher pay, greater privileges and different culture, resulted in what has been called a semi-organised Australian attack on the US PX that turned into a riot involving between two and four thousand men. US Military Police tried to break up the fracas and a short time later a shot was fired by a US MP and an Australian digger was killed. Eight other Australians were wounded, as well as 11 Americans.

The subsequent enquiry found that the Australians started the physical clash, but the Americans were also responsible. The US MP who fired the shot was exonerated and three Australian servicemen, accused of being ringleaders of the riot, were arrested and sentenced to over five months imprisonment with hard labour. The reports, inquiry and stories that have since come to light after being censored for many years, are many and varied in details, they do however reveal a deep dislike of the Americans by the Australians. Sources reveal that this was much more than Digger/GI relations; the bureaucracies in both the civil and the military authorities were also responsible for the opinions of the common soldier. At the pinnacle of the command structure of their respective countries' military forces, MacArthur and Blamey were hardly brother officers and their ill-feeling towards each other trickled down the command structure through the officers to the troops. Despite the riot described above and other outbreaks of violence between US and Australian troops, the build-up of GIs in Australia continued throughout the next year, peaking in mid-1943 at 150,000.

Why not Aussie cash?

Inspection of these chits shows the denominations in Australian shillings and pence, reflecting the country of use and not the dollars and cents of US currency. For all this the fact that US facilities instituted a chit system does reflect the determination of US forces to maintain their independent accounting systems separate from the Allied war effort.

Australian units used the tab system in their facilities at home and the chit system overseas in Palestine and other centres; however it was only towards the end of the war that the chit system invaded the clubs, canteens and messes of home unit facilities.

References

The Battle of Brisbane by Peter Thompson and Robert Macklin ABC Books 2001
www.ozatwar.com/locations and many more pages of this wonderful site
Australian Archives 34/301/569- Accommodation for United States Army Officers in Brisbane 12/8/1942