

With absolutely perfect weather, some 27 of us sallied forth to explore Port Stephens, a stunningly picturesque feature of the New South Wales coastline. Our accommodation at Marina Resort enjoys panoramic views across the bay and set the scene for our opening get-together in their conference room. Afterwards, the shuttle bus from the West Coastal Diggers Club picked us up for dinner in the Brasserie.

Judging by the pleasure craft in the Nelson Bay Marina, and the variety of restaurants, the locality is now quite up market. But, it wasn't always so elegant.

History records that in the early days, convicts who escaped from Parramatta had made their way overland, settled there, and inter-married with friendly aboriginals... no racial discrimination there!

That wasn't discovered until 1795 when one Captain Broughton took shelter in the Port from a storm and 'liberated' the convicts!

Governor Macquarie and his wife visited in the early 1800s and the area became a source of timber for shipping to Sydney. Fast forward to 1916 when land was resumed for a naval base at Salamander, to be the principal naval base for eastern Australia. That plan was scuttled in 1931 when it was declared to be too shallow for naval vessels. This became advantageous in WW2 because it did become a naval base but protected from Japanese submarines by the shallow water.

Around the end of WW1, noted town planner Walter Burley Griffin nominated the north side for the creation of Port Stephens City, to be the new ACT. For lack of infrastructure, that plan failed and the over 100 resident dolphins were left in peace, attracting the start of tourism in the Port.

WW2 changed everything. The Australian and US defence forces needed a training establishment to train for beach landings. Noted coastal ships, Manoora, Manunda and Westralia were requisitioned by the navy as troop transports, shore based HMAS Assault was established, and now as HMAS Manoora, with her sister ships, troops practiced beach landings in readiness for pushing back the Japanese up north.

Tomaree, the headland at the southern entrance was fortified with 152mm guns, torpedo tubes, searchlights, radar towers, barracks and hospital for military personnel and of course, the lighthouse with its panoramic views up and down the coastline. Little remains today except for the lighthouse and associated museum, and the hospital which has become the art centre.

All of the above history is on display at the lighthouse museum where our group spent some time absorbing the colourful past. The Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol operates from the building and there is a delightful coffee shop overlooking the view.

From the lighthouse, our group was taken by coach to the former HMAS Assault hospital, now the Port Stephens Community Art Centre. The works of art on display, indeed the whole building showed volunteering and the love of art, at its best... The hot scones, jam and cream were pretty good too!

Next event was the ferry ride to Tea Gardens. No doubt, the ferry could tell some tales. The seats must have retired some decades ago from a cinema, with the exception of those which clearly once belonged to a church. It chugged its way up the Myall River to a wharf where a bus took us to the Tea Gardens Country Club for a delicious lunch. Those who come on these expeditions need to fast beforehand; such is the quantity of food offered!

From Tea Gardens our coach took us by road around to a macadamia farm and shop where, naturally, we indulged coffee and macadamias. From there we travelled to a winery cum brewery. We were outnumbered by Korean tourists but it is doubtful that our party was desperate for more alcohol given that we had a big dinner ahead of us.

Grateful for some rest time beforehand, we fronted up for a mouthwatering dinner prepared by one of the finest chefs on the coast, washed down by some fine wine. It was a memorable night and save for breakfast next morning, it was an appropriate time to recognize Mary Hopkins for all the organization she and husband Alan put in to make it a smooth running schedule.

Thank You Mary & Alan.

PS When our late Allan Moyes read this report noting that Australian and US Defense Forces needed a place to train for beach landings, he said "I was there during WW2. We spent a lot of time teaching US forces how to land on a beach."

Little did we know that our late revered leader could have written more of the history.