

Manbulloo Station

The English conglomerate, the Australian Investment Agency Limited, known as Vestey's, had their Australian headquarters in Sydney. Their pastoral leases extended from south of Darwin to the WA border. Vestey's held land in the Northern Territory under many different names and operated from their Darwin office as The Northern Agency Limited. Their subsidiary Willeroo and Manbulloo Limited leased Manbulloo, Willeroo and Delamere stations and other land under Grazing Licences.

Situated on the southern bank of the Katherine River 12 kilometres from Katherine, Manbulloo was established by Vestey's in 1917 to be used as a link between its other stations to the west and the railway, which in a few years was to cross the Katherine River. Their plan was to rail the cattle to their newly constructed meatworks in Darwin: a plan doomed to fail. Manbulloo was the most

Bush wagonette, 1921.

Homestead entrance, 1960.

John Skinner in stock yards, 1960.

Station yards, saddle shed and cow bails, 1960.



Homestead, 1921.

social of all the Vestey stations in the NT, perhaps influenced by its close proximity to Katherine, and played host to many important dignitaries.

The main homestead, a 45' X 60' two-storeyed building built by local tradesmen, was constructed of corrugated iron, local cypress pine and sawn timber. The top floor had four bedrooms with a large verandah all round. Underneath were the manager's office, the bookkeeper's office, the store and dining room. Over the years changes were made on the top floor of the homestead as the verandah was enclosed with split bamboo and blinds.

In 1922 the homestead, kitchen, bath house, meat house, hide house, men's hut, wagon shed and blacksmith's shop, all of which were reasonably new buildings, were valued at over 1,800 pounds.

Later the complex grew to include the overseer's quarters, married men's quarters, stockmen's dining room, saddler's shop and a workshop, built with corrugated iron and sawn timber milled using the station's saw mill. Close to the kitchen a 9' X 8' antbed and rock oven, enclosed in a corrugated



Building loading ramp, 1962.



Ruby Burrandilla with Sophie and Andrew Doran, 1959.



Camp cook, Manbulloo Charlie, 1960.

iron shed, was used every few days to bake bread for the whole of the station population.

The station was naturally watered by the Katherine River, King River and numerous permanent water holes. In Manbulloo's early history the well close to the homestead was 65 feet deep, timbered to the bottom and equipped with Comet Mill. The water filled a substantially built 10,000 gallon squatters tank that supplied reticulated water to the main homestead building, the dip and the killing pen. During times of very heavy rain Manbulloo became an island in a sea of flood water.

The tennis court was made around 1926 during Mr Duckham's management. A large number of Aborigines took the donkey cart out bush and armed with picks and crowbars collected ant bed. On site the Aboriginal women pounded the ant bed with hammers and smoothed it to make it an acceptable playing surface.

By the early 1930s the station had a phone connection and manager John Newmarch cleared the first strip, long enough for the use of a Tiger Moth, near the homestead.

Fencing timber was readily available with bloodwood, coolibah, stringybark, woollybutt, ironwood, white gum and other timbers growing prolifically. Cyprus, which was white ant resistant and often used in construction, was further out on the western side of the station.

The large herd of goats was milked and cared for by the station Aboriginal women. In 1925 bulls were

Ready to leave for Willeroo.
L to R Sir Philip Proctor, Sir A C Campbell, Sister King, Mrs Hurst and baby, J Marshall, 1922.

imported from Queensland, however other bulls came mainly from Wave Hill, another of Vestey's station. The cattle estimated on the station in 1934 were over 9,000 with 29 mules, 37 donkeys, 80 goats and over 100 horses.

In 1953 under Rynne's management there were two stock camps operating. He arranged repairs and renovations to the homestead and 'vastly improved' it. By 1965, there were 9,100 head of cattle.

Using drovers stock were walked to the Wyndham meatworks or sent to Queensland via the Barkly Stock Route.

The station was stocked with shorthorn cattle until the 1970s when Brahman stock was introduced.

Manbulloo's managers were a mix of single, married and married with families. Staff included white, mixed race and Aboriginal stockmen, with Chinese cooks and gardeners in the earlier days.

The station had decent road access to Katherine, although flooded creeks often left the station cut-off from Katherine during the Wet. The station had its own truck, an Army Blitz, that was well maintained. By then, water was pumped from the Katherine River.

After operating as a cattle station for seventy four years Manbulloo's long pastoral history with Vestey's came to an end in 1993 when the station, PL 525, carrying 4,410 shorthorn brahman-cross cattle, with brand QZT was sold.

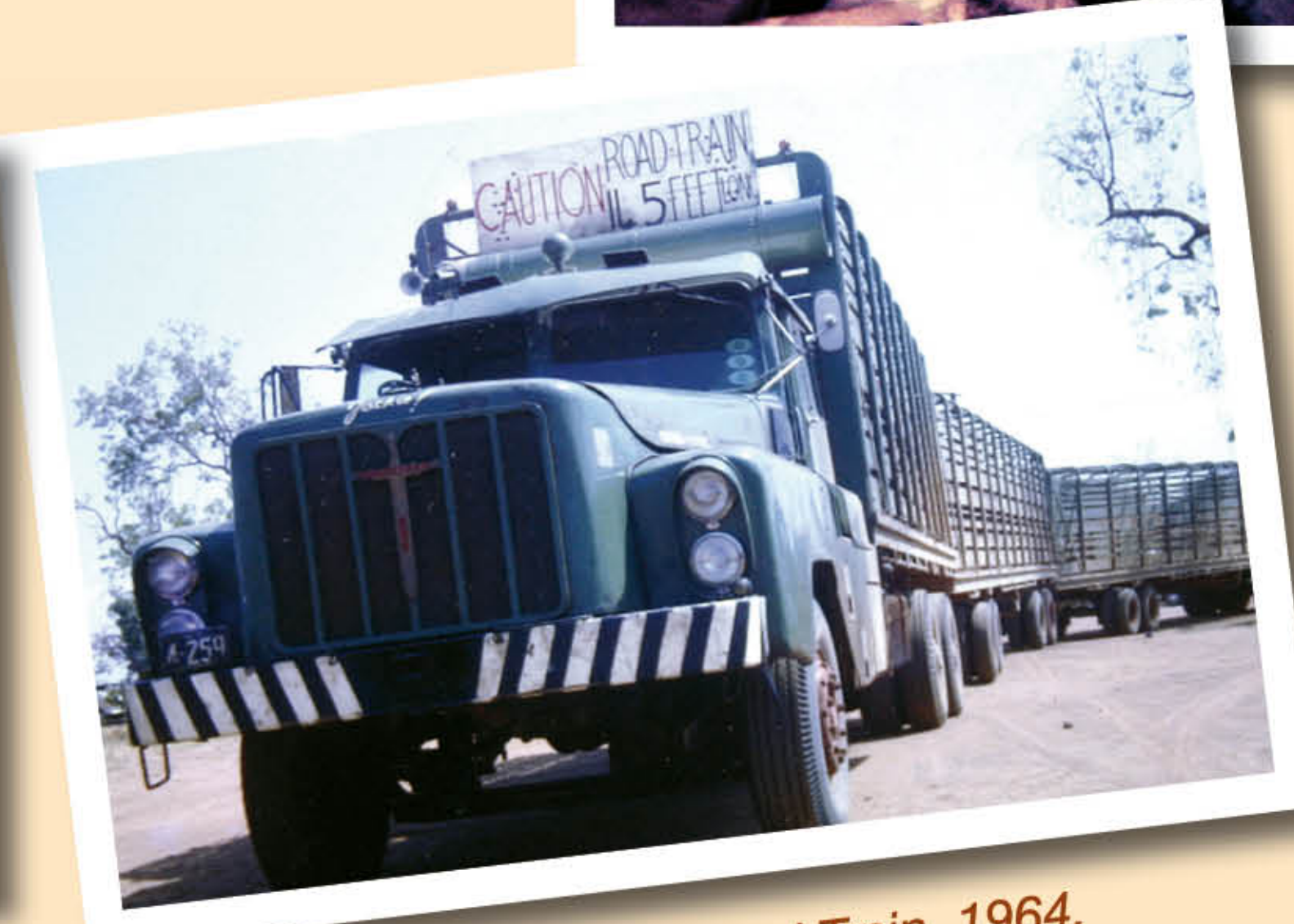
Further changes came when the station was split creating three separate titles: one is run as a mango plantation, another as a cattle enterprise and the third as a cattle and tourist enterprise.



Dip cattle walkout, 1921.



Crocodile skin, 1933.



Rolls Royce Road Train, 1964.



Cattle in yards, 1960.

Station hands working cattle in Homestead yards, 1959.

Wardaman

The Wardaman Dreaming is the Lightning Brothers. Although there are Lightning Brothers painting sites on Willeroo, Delamere, Innesvale and through to the Victoria River, there are none on Manbulloo. Their walking paths extend from Manbulloo country north to Pine Creek and south to Delamere and the Victoria River. The Wardaman worked on Manbulloo, Willeroo and Delamere stations all owned by Vestey's. The main language spoken on the station, excluding English, was Wardaman. Murnburli is the Wardaman word for Crested Pigeon and from that has come the station name of Manbulloo. Their word for river is 'yirrgulun'.

Although employed as stockmen, housemaids, kitchen hands, gardeners, in the laundry and any other work as dictated by the manager, the Wardaman people went walkabout on a regular basis. With them they took flour, tea, sugar and tobacco boga. Tobacco, when rolled with ash to make it go further, was called *mabaj* and was carried in tobacco tins or moulded behind and around a person's ear. Traditional bush foods included bush potato, bush onion, black plums *buda*, sugar bag *goyin* (bush honey), spinifex pigeon eggs, kangaroo, possum *dilygun*, goanna *yijumidba* and flying fox *ganben* were plentiful between Manbulloo and Florina. Fish, barramundi *marbiny*, crocodile, turtle, long yam *megerman* and water lily gadi and their roots were plentiful in the rivers and waterholes.

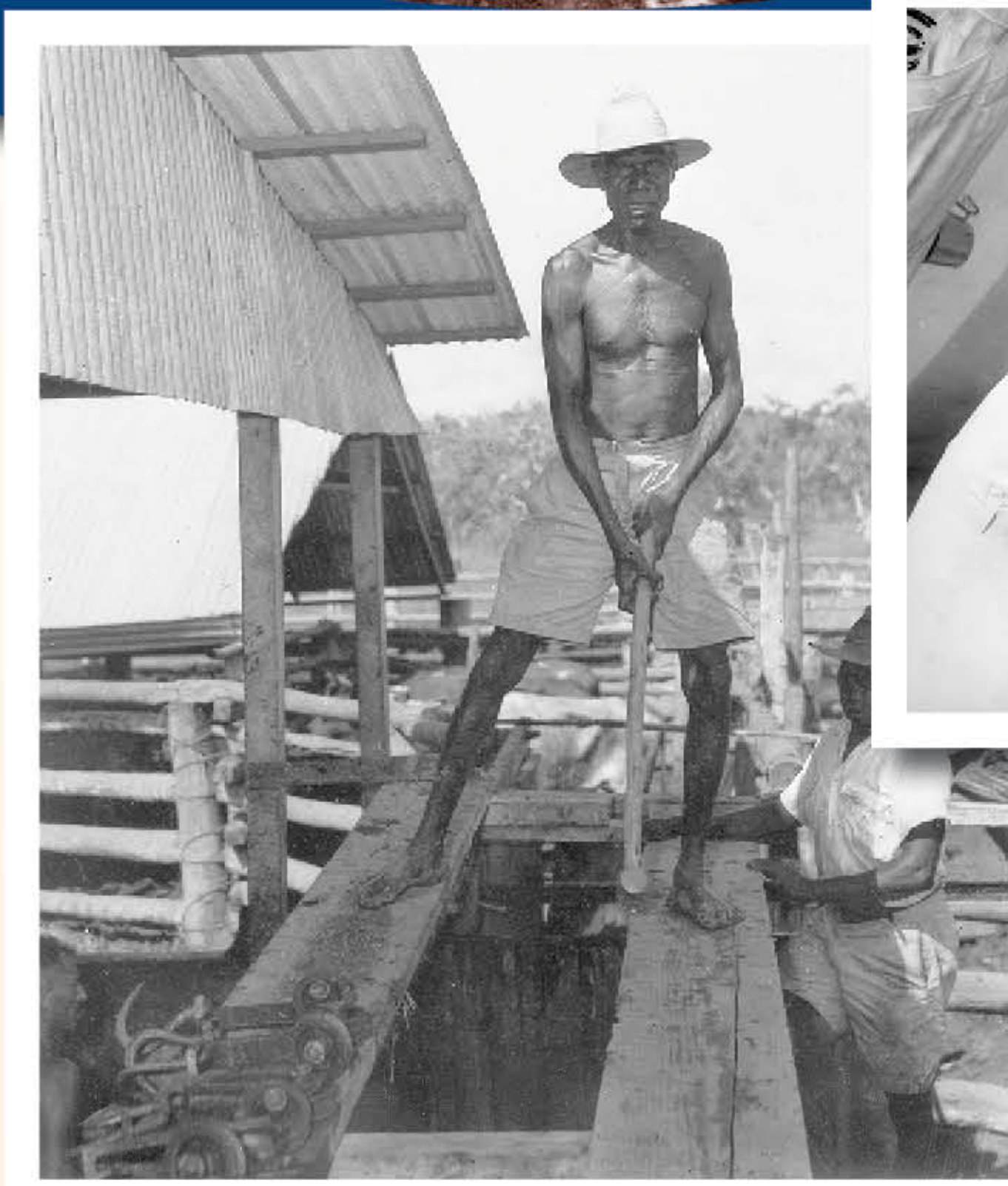
Food was carried home in a coolamon *gularla* and smaller items were carried in dilly bags *ginan*, hand made string bags. Corroborees were held almost nightly with clapsticks *garbij* and didgerdoo *marlugbarr* used as part of the singing and dancing.

Aborigines living and working on Manbulloo included Wardaman, Yangman, Jawyon and a few Dogaman and Mudburra. Most were used to limited contact with white pastoralists until WW2 when many of the station workers plus other Aborigines from the surrounding region were brought to the station to work for the Army. Their living conditions and how they were treated as people changed dramatically for the better, compared to what they had been used to previously.

In 1947 a '20' x 15' mess hut with ant-bed floor; an 8' x 8' shower room with concrete floor; and a 7' x 8' laundry with cement floor' was constructed to serve the needs of the women, particularly those who work in and around the homestead. Manbulloo had a regular stream of visitors and the women who worked in the kitchen and as waitresses, were required to be clean. Known as the 'punkah kids', children were employed to sit on the floor of the station dining room with a piece of string attached from the punkah to their big toe, and pull the punkah keeping the guests cool in the breeze.

Under the Pastoral Industry Regulations women who worked were entitled to six dresses per year and the stockmen trousers, shirts, hat and boots, plus a swag, all provided by the station, with usually around forty people employed. Those who worked received cooked meals at the station and the usual beef and damper in the stock camps. Other Aborigines received weekly rations from the store. They included flour, baking powder, tea, sugar, tobacco, matches, jam, syrup, soap and rice. At varying times fresh vegetables and goats milk was available.

Wardaman people worked as stockmen, mechanics, donkey team carers, gardeners, domestics, laundry, kitchen, dining room and rubbish collection. Although white and Chinese cooks were employed, for many years an Aboriginal man named Charlie *Yingelgelba*, who could prepare a three course meal and bake cakes and pastries, was the cook. Nancy *Mardinya* who was employed as a domestic was married to Big Paddy *Merkin*, for many years the 'manager's boy' a very important job for he travelled everywhere with the manager in his car, instead of horseback.



Mick standing over knocking box with Bob beside box, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.014285



Tommy, an Aboriginal orderly and Sister B. Suffren, 1942.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.027836.



Aboriginal camp, 1930.



Aboriginal women cooking a wallaby, 1933.

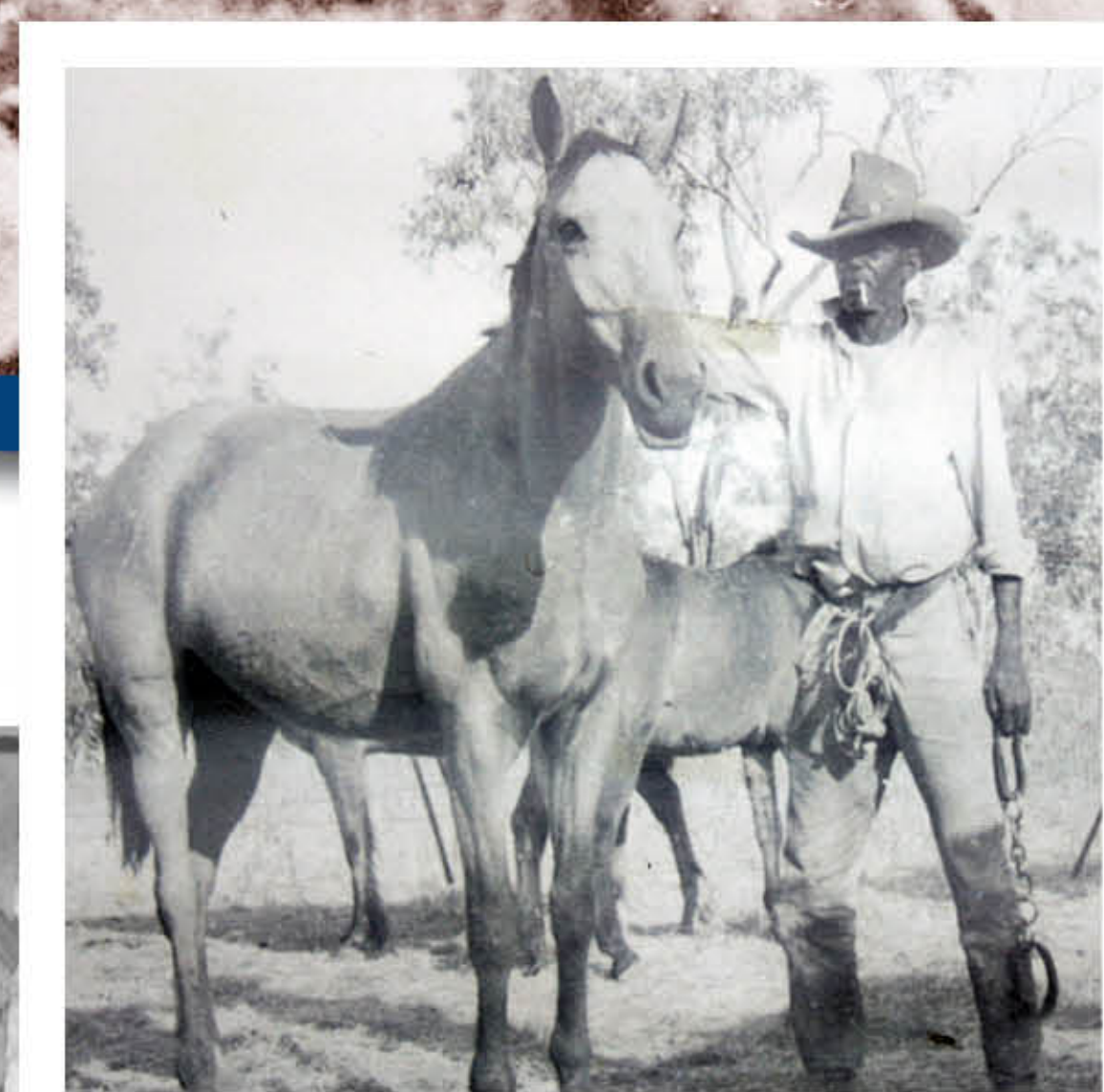


Aboriginal accommodation, 1959.

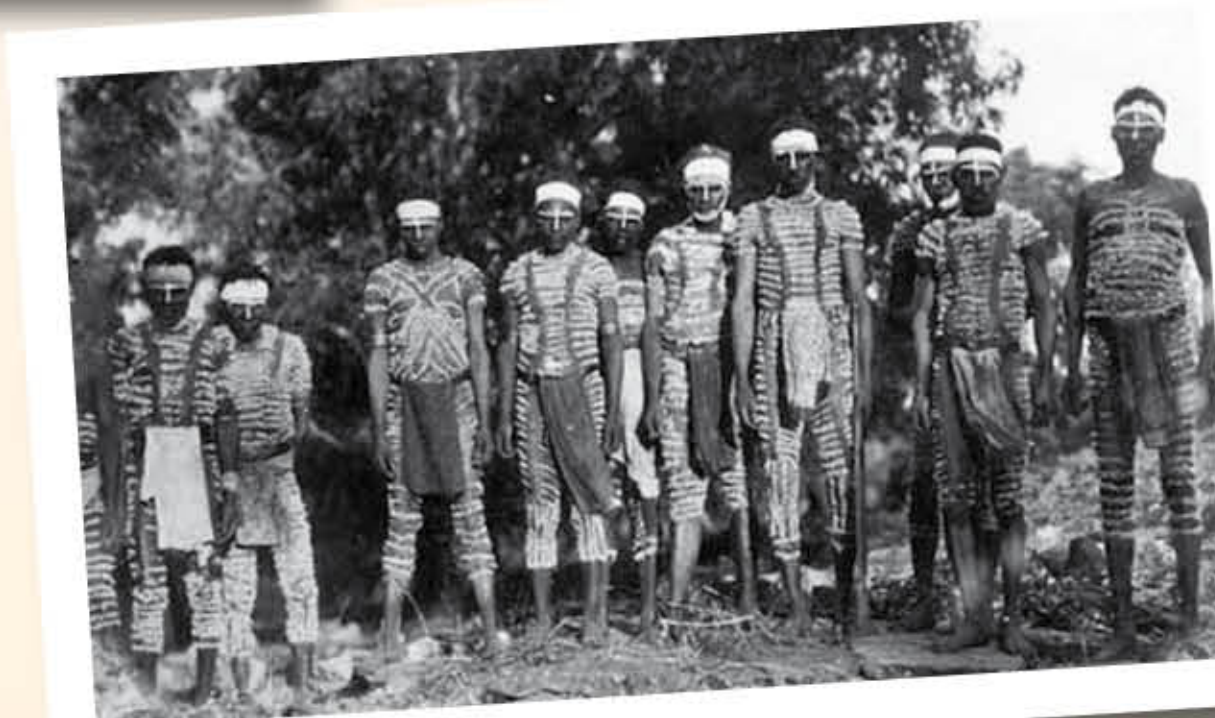
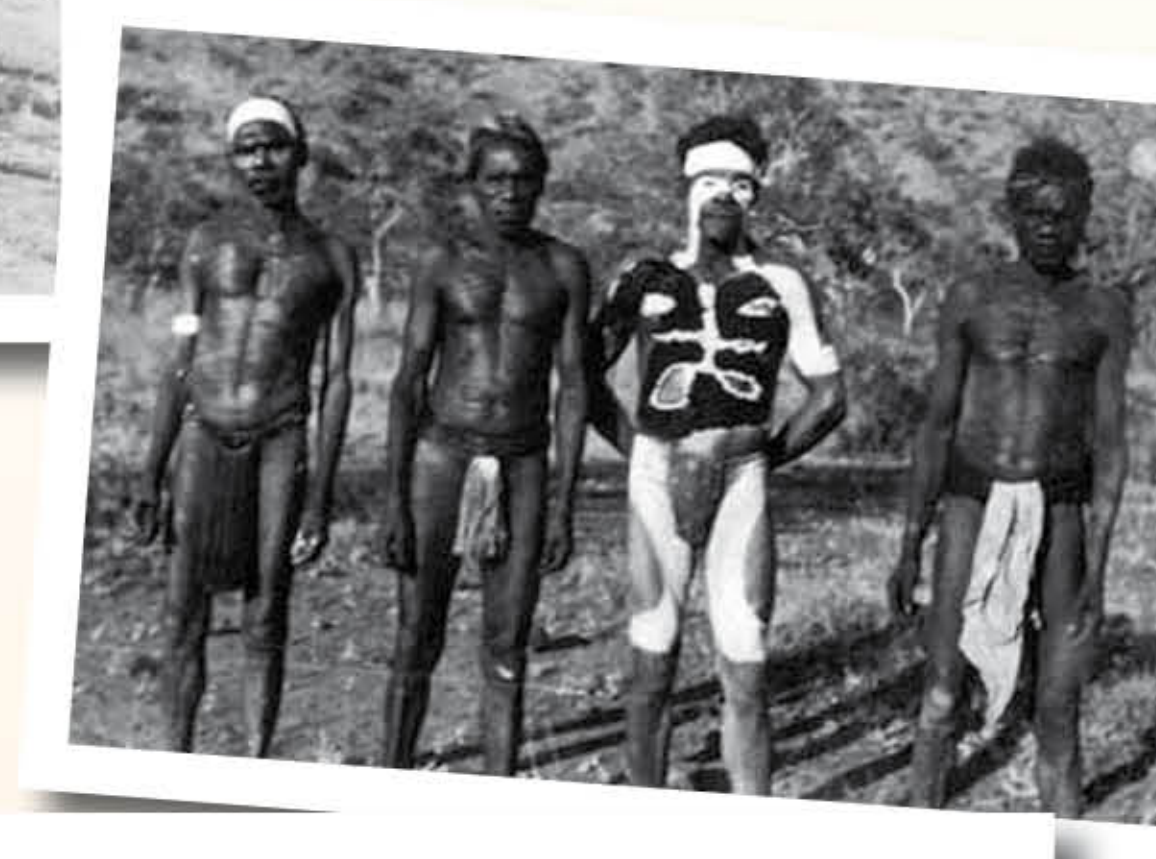


Aboriginal women cleaning and salting a bullock hide at Army abattoirs.

Aboriginal men and women ready for ceremony.



Larry, horse tracker, 1963.



Captain Bishop always seemed to get money, alcohol and anything else he wanted from the Army. He was always in trouble with Tom Fisher, as alcohol for Aborigines was illegal in those days, however Captain continued to maintain his 'trade'.

During the Fisher and then the Rynne management years those Aborigines who worked were fed cooked meals and all received beef and fresh vegetables. Those working in the kitchen were given scraps from the dining room which they were allowed to take home.

In the early days the Aboriginal camp on the station was mainly a lot of humpies, built of scrap iron, bush timber, branches, rags and what ever else they could scrounge. Vestey's were not known for their generosity in relation to Aboriginal housing. Patrol Officer's reports for years reported that the facilities provided for the Aborigines were disgraceful, filthy, dirty, untidy, unhygienic and lacking in sanitation. Yet they also report that Aborigines were fed well and 'in good health'.

Little had changed by 1953: 'The native camp is situated about 200 yards from the main dwellings, on the river bank, and consists of the usual collection of native style dwellings of corrugated iron, branches, old kerosene tins and the like'. Although the station laundry was made available to Aboriginal women, they preferred to wash in the

river. No water was piped to the Aboriginal camp. The whites were provided for with bucket type latrines, but nothing for Aborigines. 'Taken as a whole, sanitary arrangements at this station must be considered as disgraceful'.

During 1963 corrugated iron huts were constructed for Aboriginal workers and pensioners in keeping with the specifications laid down by the Welfare Ordinance. Pensioners living in the new huts included Burrundilla, Brumby and Paddy. Burrundilla was once overheard telling some of his Aboriginal friends that the sea was salty 'because Vestey's let all that salt run down from the [Darwin] meatworks'. Old Gregory *Darlunggag* who had spent most of his working life on the station and Jabiru *Luwungmirr* were also there along with Claudie Manbulloo *Yirdirdiman* and old Annie *Idrock*.

Sacred to the Wardaman were the two burial sites on Manbulloo. The earlier system in place was that a senior Wardaman man told a new station manager of sacred places to be avoided by the Europeans and in that manner Vestey's did not invade or destroy anything that was sacred to the Wardaman or other Aboriginal people employed by them.

Although the Wardaman people had been living at Binjari for many years it was not until 19 October 1990 that, under the Community Living Area scheme, Binjari was excised from Manbulloo.

World War II

As World War II loomed closer to northern Australia the defence of the north became a priority for the Australian Government, even more so after the bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942. Airfields and Army camps were established between Darwin and Alice Springs, some larger and more complex than others. Manbulloo station on the banks of the Katherine River was to become a major military establishment in the area.

On 15 February 1944 acquisition of 989 acres of the Manbulloo lease by the Department of Army took place. The land in question was '...subject to an order under National Security (General) Regulations 53(i) Hirings Serial No. 210 taken out on 20th August 1943...'. By November the Northern Territory Force had effected a survey of the land and later Manbulloo surrendered further land from 186N lease for agricultural purposes. Vesteys then requested a reduction in rental.

The land was required for an airfield and an abattoir operated by the 3 Field Butchery, which included a large freezer and ice works, cattle yards and bores. The complex included an Army camp consisting of 46 huts, was a mixture of Sidney Williams huts, sawn and bush timber huts with corrugated iron roofs and dirt or concrete flooring. They housed barracks for the soldiers and included mess huts, kitchens, quartermaster's store, showers and latrines.

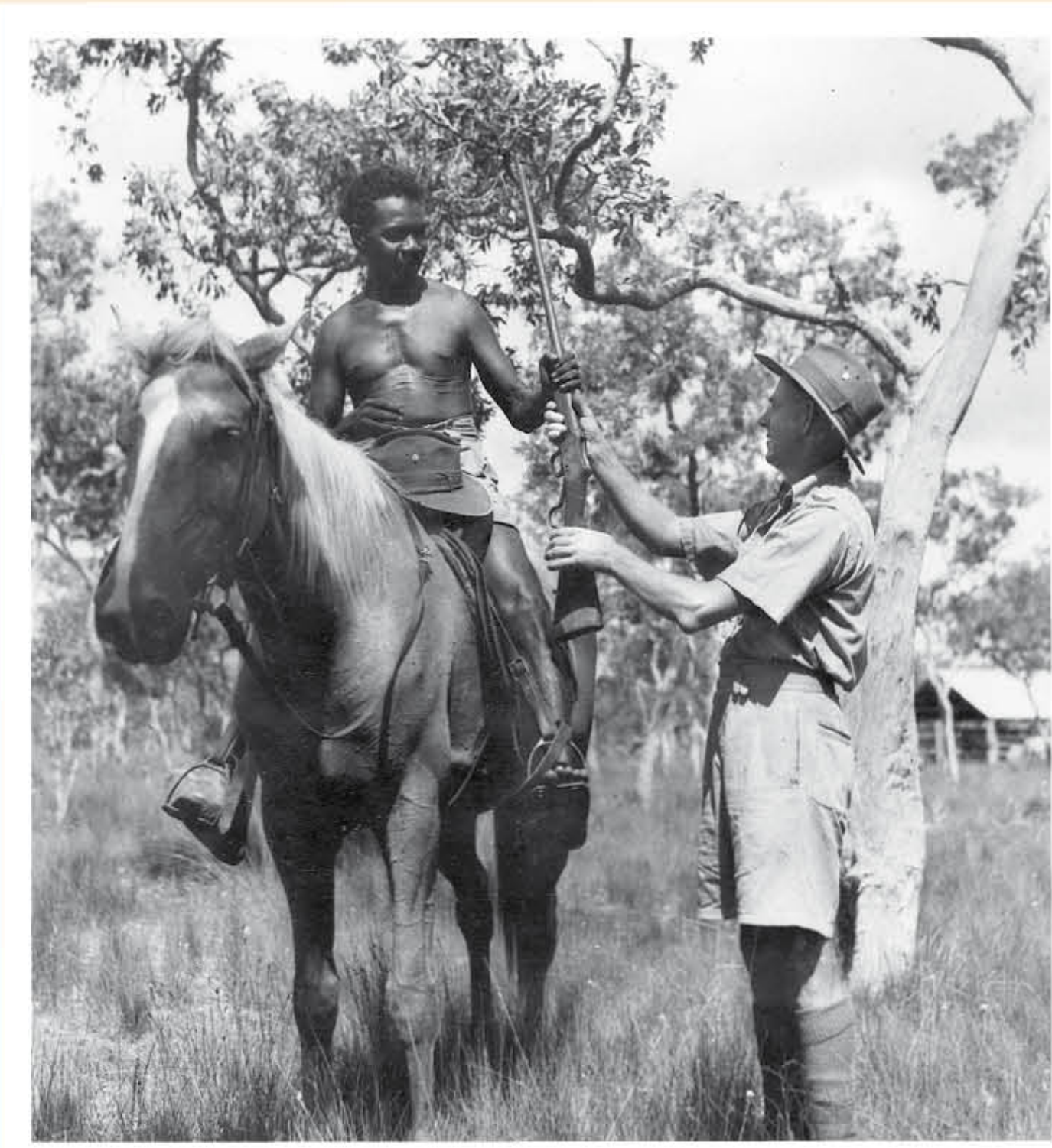
Vesteys had a contract to supply cattle for the meatworks. Manbulloo and other Vesteys station were given preference in supply.

The Manbulloo Army (Aboriginal) Compound employed 60 males, 6 female, and supported 50 dependents, totalling 116. The site of the camp was three miles from the abattoirs, close to the river and was considered 'safe' from other military camps.

Further west from the abattoir was the Army Poultry Farm covering 29 acres. The ten 150' X 15' poultry runs and pens, with corrugated iron roofing and wire netting walls, housed an estimated 2,000 chooks, with the 80' X 15' brooding pen separate. The Army camp included two sets of quarters, a mess and kitchen and two sets of showers. The latrines had bamboo walls. The store was a 120' X 20' double Sidney Williams hut, with a concrete floor. Over 2,000 feet of piping was used in the watering of the poultry.

Adjacent to that 148 acres was taken for a farm. Originally a few men from the 1st Army Farm Company commenced the scrub clearing, then the farms were run by the No 6 and No 7 Farm Platoon, 2 Australian Farm Company.

Tropical fruits including paw paws and watermelons and vegetables including tomatoes, cabbages, lettuce and cucumbers were grown. The produce of this and other agricultural farms established by the Army was used to feed the local troops and was sent to other areas. The soldiers often swapped their produce with the Field Butchery for fresh meat. On one occasion, when the tomato crop was at its peak, it took fifty five men to pick the crop.



George on horseback being handed a rifle to go out to kill a rogue bull.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.014284.

Ration and mail buggy of the North Australian Observer Unit, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.058439.



A lecture on the throwing of Hand Grenades, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.058438.



Lieutenant S. Chapman, with portable wireless telephone sets loaded on packhorses, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.058429.



Troopers of the North Australian Observer Unit, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.058474.



Sergeant W.H. Heazle feeding pullets, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.057394.



Slaughter yards, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.014281.

All buildings were constructed of bush timber frames, corrugated iron roofs some of which were bitumen covered and either dirt or concrete floors. A 5,000 gallon tank at each farm supplied water from the Katherine River.

Power for the camp was supplied from the abattoirs. Over 3,000 feet of piping was used on the farms. As the War came to an end all of the buildings and equipment for the farms were sold at Army Disposal sales in 1947 with the poultry farm buildings sold in 1948.

The 121st Australian General Hospital (AGH) was a 1,200-bed hospital, set

A lecture on the .303 Bren Light Machine Guns, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.058436.

up under canvas and galvanised iron huts. The station sawmill was used and many of the buildings were constructed with sawn timber. Later the hospital was staffed by the 101st Australian General Hospital Unit.

Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS) which included sisters, nurses and Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) women looked after Army troops, members of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), the Allied Works Council, railway workers, Aborigines and any civilian who were left in the area. Records indicate that several babies were born there.

Many struggled with the heat of the Wet season and were amazed at the height of the Katherine River as it filled with floodwater. Entertainment included dances, picture nights and concerts arranged by themselves and provided by visiting units. There were four tennis courts in the vicinity: three on the area leased by the Army and one at the side of the

station homestead. There were two picture theatres: one in the Field Butchery area and one near the 101ST AGH.

Everyone used mosquito nets. The women attempted to improve their living standards by adding rock paths and gardens to their living area. Although those in the services enjoyed the mild Dry season climate, many struggled in the tropical heat of the Wet season, but as one VAD said 'we were young and took the heat and the discomfort in our stride'. Everyone ate in messes. Some with horror stories about tinned food and powered eggs decided the answer was to become friendly with someone in the Quarter Masters Store. Soldiers talked of trading with local farmers for pumpkins and other vegetables.

In October 1944 the 101st AGH began closing down and pulling out. The AAMWS went to various posting including overseas. The Army hospital was situated on the site of the Katherine meatworks. A cairn with a plaque inscribed: 22-3-1942 121 AGH Australia, in front of the meatworks, acknowledges the significant work of the hospital.

The Katherine War Cemetery was adjacent to the hospital. On one occasion a nurse was being buried at sunrise, which was the regulation, and over seventy nurses wearing their red capes were walking behind the cortege. With the colour of the sunrise and the red capes it was described as 'so colourful and so sad' and very emotional. The bodies were exhumed after the War and re-interred in the Adelaide River War Cemetery.

After the War, Manbulloo once again continued its role as a cattle station. Although the meatworks, farms and camps were sold at Army Disposal sales there was an enormous amount of debris left on the site. Some was bulldozed into the Katherine River and manager Tom Fisher objected strongly and repeatedly asked that the area be cleaned up. However, sixty years later, the remains can still be seen of the very extensive Army camp that was significant in its contribution to feed and care for the troops in Northern Australia.

Parade of Headquarters, No. 14A Lines of Communication Area, 1943.
Australian War Memorial Neg.No.057385.