



fact file

Z Force Commando School

QUEENSLAND: The world's largest sand island, Fraser Island, was the secret training ground for special commando troops during World War II. It wasn't until after the war that the bravery and daring of the men who trained on the island became publicly known.

The Australian Government chose Fraser Island as the site for its secret Commando School for its seclusion and because the island's difficult and varied terrain lent itself to both jungle and amphibious training.

Z Unit was formed in 1942, in response to the rapid Japanese invasion of the Pacific area, to organise agents and missions into enemy occupied areas in the South West Pacific. The Z Unit was given the cover name of Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD) a nondescript name for a very active group of agents.

A total of 909 men camped at the Fraser Commando School at North White Cliffs, on the western side of the island, and underwent specialist training for what turned out to be some of the most successful raids of the war. Z was a special unit known only to the Prime Minister and High Command.

More than 260 operations behind enemy lines were undertaken. Some are still classified on the secret list.

The most famous mission carried out by members of the Z Unit was a raid on Singapore Harbour in 1943 when fourteen men sailed from Western Australia in the *Krait*, a small, captured Japanese fishing vessel, to successfully destroy 40 000 tons of enemy shipping.

From the *Krait*, anchored 20 miles off Singapore, three canoe teams penetrated Singapore Harbour at night and with magnetic explosive limpet mines blew up the shipping. The operation was code-named *Jaywick* and the *Krait* returned to Australia without loss of life.

It was the longest and one of the most extraordinary sea raids in the history of war. The *Krait* travelled nearly 5000 miles and spent 47 days away from Australia, 33 of those in Japanese-controlled waters. Every man who took part was decorated or mentioned in dispatches.

The Captain and navigator of the *Krait*, Lt. Ted Carse RANVR, was a graduate of the Royal Australian Naval College and at one time in charge of commando training on



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Fraser Island.

The great majority of personnel at Fraser Commando School were from the Australian Army and were members of Z Unit; however other personnel training there included British, Malay, Dutch, New Zealander, Timorese, Singaporean, Chinese, Free French and Filipino. Most came from the armed services, but some were civilians.

Training at the camp was intense and local leave for the troops was not allowed. They trained daily, from early morning to late evening. The main training emphasis was on physical fitness and a typical day started with an early morning eight kilometre run in full equipment to Lake McKenzie, and back, and included a swim across the lake fully clothed, all under the stopwatch.

The men were taught how to survive in the jungle, unarmed combat techniques and methods of silent killing. They learned how to operate all weapons, including the silent Welrod pistol, a sub machine gun with silencer, and the killing knife. They became expert in using small party tactics, plastic explosives, timing devices and booby trap pressure switches.

Paddling and navigating a two man canoe (Folboat), day and night in all types of weather, for long distances was included in the training. The men were taught to navigate, handle a yacht and to send in raiding parties from the sea. They learned to identify enemy ships, aircraft and equipment and basic signals, wireless communication and codes.

Malayan pearl divers from Broome and natives from the South West Pacific taught the men to speak colloquial Malay. The men also had to know how to avoid capture and torture and to use the cyanide L Pill in the mouth, if necessary.

Some of the remnants of the special commando camp can be seen at the North White Cliffs site, just a short walk from Kingfisher Bay Resort and Village. Still visible are the flooring of the camp headquarters, the concrete contour map embedded in the ground and the old boiler on the beach which was used for limpet mine training.

A map of the original camp ground and its buildings has reproduced and is displayed with other memorabilia next to the resort reception at Kingfisher Bay Resort.

Media Contact:

media@kingfisherbay.com Phone +617 3032 2809