

## **WESSEL ISLAND - 312RS**

*D H(Doug) Beard*

When our posting came through to Wessel Island, it was difficult to find out just where it was and how we would get there. Eventually a small dot in the Arafura Sea on a map was found and this was to be our home for the next six months.

The first stage of the trip was by Catalina to Melville Bay. The trip was memorable for me because I went to sleep in a gun blister and received the worst case of sunburn I have ever had. By the time we arrived at Wessel my whole face was peeling, giving the appearance of some horrible tropical disease.

We left the next morning on an Army supply boat having been billeted in an Army camp over night. The trip was only 80 miles, so we expected a pleasant one day trip. Instead we had four days of crawling along through uncharted waters with a man on the starboard bow "swinging the lead". We'd heard of the expression before but it was quite interesting to watch. He stood on a specially constructed platform out from the hull with a safety rail around him.

He constantly swung the weighted rope marked in fathoms and called the depth to the bridge. When he was down to "And a half three, Sir", the ship would stop. If it was "By the mark, three, Sir", we would go astern and try to find deeper water. This is why it took four days to cover 80 miles. Finally on a dull squally afternoon, the ship stopped and we heard the anchor chain being let out. There was no land in sight, but we were told we had arrived and a long boat was lowered to take us ashore. All our gear and supplies were loaded in and we set off on a two mile trip. We landed on a **deserted beach with a group of curious natives** our only reception committee.

After standing in the rain for about half an hour, we heard a rumbling in the jungle and an old **Fordson tractor with trailer** appeared down a dirt track. Everything was loaded on the trailer and we charged off to find the **camp**. It was **about a mile from the beach** by a very narrow completely overgrown track. Once we hit a deep **gutter while crossing a creek** and several kit bags finished up in the water.

On arrival at the camp we were taken **to a tent in the middle of a large pond**, so the first job was to drain the pond and settle in. A few days later the rain stopped and we got everything dried out and began to enjoy our Island Hideaway.

We really enjoyed a very pleasant war on Wessel with a large group of friendly natives to look after us doing all the routine chores around the camp in addition to providing us with beautiful seafoods which they speared from their dug-out canoes. Lobsters were enormous and we actually got tired of them when they were our only food when the plane could not land with fresh supplies.

**A DH86 Dragon** normally brought mail, fresh meat, butter etc, once a week, but after prolonged rain the airstrip was out of commission. On one occasion after we had been subjected to week after week of lobsters, oysters and fish, the pilot decided to come down low over the strip and just toss everything out.

This was fine until one of the lads received a broken leg after being hit by a side of beef. The boxes of butter also suffered somewhat by being dropped from about 100 feet. We managed to salvage some of it.

There are many pleasant memories of Wessel where we had complete peace in wartime. One unusual episode involved a 16 ft python. We met it in middle of the track at 2 am on our way between the Ops Room and the doover. It was curled up and it was impossible to get around it because of the thick jungle. I went back and phoned through to the Duty Crew asking that they meet us at the scene with a 303 which they had with them. The monster was duly dispatched and it was decided that we should take it back to camp to show the others.

Then we had a better idea and draped it outside the CO's tent with the front six feet across the floorboards and the head propped up facing towards the sleeping CO who happened to a young ethnic Chinese, just off course and not too sure about this mad bunch he had to command. After we made a little noise the CO woke up, saw the snake, took his trusty 38 and emptied the chamber into an already very dead snake. We didn't wait around to witness his embarrassment, but he took it all in good spirits.

Another unusual experience was when I went "native" for two days during a break. My tent boy was Prince **Baranuyū**, son of the Chief and next in line to the leadership of the tribe. He was very skilled at living off the land, so two of us went with him to live as they lived. We slept in a cave, started a fire with fire sticks, speared and cooked a wallaby, speared fish and lobsters, dug for yams and generally experienced life as it had been lived for thousands of years. We were quite happy to return to the comparative comfort of the camp.

A never-to-be forgotten experience was to witness a circumcision corroboree when a number of young boys were admitted as men to the tribe. A harrowing spectacle for us, but I guess much more so for the young boys undergoing an "operation" by the witch doctor with a rusty cutthroat razor without the benefit of an anaesthetic. The worst part was the group of wailing women who were injuring themselves to alleviate the boys' pain.

Not recommended for the faint hearted !

Wessel was an interesting interlude on a very pleasant island, but after six months, it was good to return to civilization and not to have to eat all those lobsters.