The Hotdogs and meatpies - World War II on the Gold Coast is supported through the Your Community Heritage Program, an initiative by the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.
AMERICANS
ON THE GOLD COAST
DURING WORLD WAR II

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At the peak of the war, Brisbane’s population of around 300,000 was increased by almost 80,000 American troops.

Here come the Americans

Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, Queensland became an important base for American forces. When Darwin was bombed in February 1942 and Japanese submarines arrived in Sydney Harbour a few months later, invasion seemed imminent. The American forces were welcomed as allies and potential protectors. To help them adjust the United States Army issued them with a small guide book titled: Instructions for American Servicemen in Australia 1942. Equipped with this they were ready to navigate their way through a country most knew nothing about!

Brisbane became the headquarters for General MacArthur’s South-West Pacific Campaign. At the peak of the war, Brisbane’s population of around 300,000 was increased by almost 80,000 American troops who were stationed in the city. It didn’t take long for them to discover the golden beaches a couple of hours to the south.

General MacArthur.
Photo courtesy of Australian War Memorial.
The American Red Cross

On 17 December 1941 General George Marshall officially recognised Amcross (the term used for the American Red Cross) “as the non military agency to operate with our expeditionary forces during the war”.1 Following this clarification about who would look after the rest and recuperation (R&R) needs of the American service men and women in Australia, the coast from Southport to Coolangatta operated as one vast leave area from August 1942 until American operations wound down in 1945.

One vast leave area

Initially R&R at Coolangatta was established in conjunction with Surfers Paradise by the enterprising Mary Phyllis Northrup, an American Red Cross club director, before the two areas began independent operations.

The Coolangatta Rest Area encompassed Greenmount, Coolangatta and Kirra and consisted of barracks, tents, rooms in hotels and flats. The Surfers Paradise Rest Area included a number of former guest houses and rooms in the Surfers Paradise Hotel. The US Navy also had rest areas which they ran separately. Submariners were treated a little differently in recognition of their dangerous work, uncomfortable conditions and high death rates.

The Civil Construction Corp, which was made up of Australian men formerly working on construction projects for public works and main roads, built the camps used by the Americans and others. As the photo illustrates they decided to have some R&R of their own in the shack they created while building the Kirra camp.

The 77th Construction Battalion, which formed part of the US Navy Construction Battalions, also known as the Seabees, arrived in Brisbane to undertake a number of tasks. These included operating naval installations and dismantling facilities that had been used by the American military and were no longer needed. They were also able to have a little fun and some rest at the same time. During their stay at the Gold Coast they were located at a large beachfront camp at Kirra (Camp One). They were also at Camp Two on Marine Parade, Coolangatta, and at Greenmount Hill (Camp Three).
They are believed to have constructed what is now a picnic facility in Pat Fagan Park at Greenmount Hill. Their effort is commemorated in a plaque at the site.

The US Army Air Corp set up a radar station at Point Danger. A barbed wire fence ran along Petrie Street, across the end of the hill at Rainbow Bay and down on to Snapper Rocks. This enclosed the top of Point Danger on the Queensland side and became a prohibited area to all except the American service men looking after the facility. They lived in a few houses overlooking Petrie Street. A .50 calibre machine gun was set up on the hill overlooking Rainbow Bay and several others were placed around the rim of Point Danger. The Americans left Point

“I’d love to go down to Coolangatta to see my gunner but we’re not allowed to go down there and he’s not allowed to come up here.”

Joyce Punch

US Navy Leave Area, Camp Number 1, Kirra.
Map courtesy of the National Archives of Australia.

Australian and American forces at Kirra Rest Camp.
Photo courtesy of Norma Bailey.
Danger in 1942 and the facility was taken over by the Royal Australian Air Force.

Following military tradition enlisted men and officers were separated with accommodation reflecting this difference in rank. Enlisted men were located in the Coolangatta Rest Area and officers were in Surfers Paradise.

Joyce Punch lived in Brisbane but she regularly visited the Gold Coast with her family. One day Joyce’s dad brought home an American officer. He told Joyce he was desperate to see his ‘gunner’, who was on R&R in Coolangatta but he was unable to visit him because he was of a lower rank, even though they had served together.

Joyce Punch thought of a way to overcome this hurdle:

The officer was Tom Redding and he was really, really yellow and he’d been up in New Guinea and he’d been brought out of the jungle by ‘fuzzie wuzzies’. He was here on R&R and he said: “I’d love to go down to Coolangatta to see my gunner but we’re not allowed to go down there and he’s not allowed to come up here”. I said to him, “I know what we can do, we can hire a couple of pushbikes and we could ride them down there”.

Their uniforms had these gold bars on them, you know 1st Lieutenant, 2nd Lieutenant and he took them off so that he just had a khaki shirt on. The only hard part was going up over Tallebudgera Hill, from Burleigh over to Tallebudgera Creek. When we got as far as Burleigh I said, “We’ll go up Goodwin Terrace and you’ll get a lovely view”. So we go up there and had a breather and something to eat and drink. We had a few hours with the gunner and he wasn’t supposed to see Redding any more than Redding was supposed to be down the coast. Anyway he saw his mate and that was a good day out.

One little known R&R haven which was not managed by Amcross was a beautiful house overlooking Currumbin Beach, at the top of James Street with commanding views the full length of the coast. The house was accessible from Woodgee Street. The house was isolated from other residences so was a perfect setting for parties.

The US Army commandeered the house, turning it into a haven for army officers.

Local knowledge states that:

One night at the height of a boisterous party the house caught fire and while not totally destroyed the house remained a burnt out shell until building restrictions were lifted at the end of the war. 4
Local support

Local support was crucial to the success of the enterprise and Mrs Winders, the wife of the mayor of Coolangatta, became the chair of the local volunteer workers. In Southport the same work was undertaken by Mrs Chandler. The volunteers mended for the servicemen, took them into Australian homes for meals and organised supervised companionship by Australian girls at dances, sporting events, picnics and general outings.

American men in their tailored uniforms, better pay, access to luxury items, good manners and overseas exoticism were attractive to many Australian women which led to some conflict with Australian servicemen. However sport was a universal equalizer and the Americans mixed with the Australian servicemen by playing impromptu basket ball games.

In 1945 the Americans commented in a Red Cross report:

> What the Aussie lacks in skill is more than made up in enthusiasm and good sportsmanship. The American teams have appreciated the competition and opportunity to get to know them in athletic competitions.

“... we ended up jitterbugging around the fire like a lot of silly fools, ...”
Shirley McAuliffe

![Certificate of Appreciation](image)  
Courtesy of John Oxley Library
Shirley McAuliffe was persuaded to become a hostess for one night which she recalls in the following excerpt from her oral history interview:

_They used to light fires on the beach and we used to have weinee roasts. They were little sausages – what did we call them, little frankfurts? Everything was so new and then we’d have marshmallows on sticks and put those in the fire too and we ended up jitterbugging around the fire like a lot of silly fools, but they looked after us and of course they had so much money, the Yanks, and all the chocolates. That’s the only time Nessie talked me into going to the hostesses. She said, “You’ll get a lot of chocolates, Shirley and cigarettes for dad and chewing gum”, and of course I didn’t worry about that but I remember the chocolates were called Baby Ruths._

On 28 February 1945 a party was held for 80 of the former hostesses which honoured their contribution to the war effort. They received badges of merit and nine senior hostesses earned special citations for outstanding service.

Desley Dolan’s family owned the Skeltons milkbar next to Jazzland in Coolangatta. The American intake of ice cream, coffee, chicken and turkey exceeded that of the Australians and their diet also included more salads and vegetables.

Australian rationing created problems in supply but the Americans had a solution for overcoming this as Desley outlines:

_When the Americans came, they wanted milk for their R&R, the navy and the army. We had the milkbar in Coolangatta but dad was on rations, on petrol tickets those days, and dad didn’t have the tickets. They wanted a lot of milk, so dad said to them, “Well, I can’t get it for you because I haven’t got the petrol tickets”, and they said they would provide a jeep and a driver and they took dad out every day and they’d get 10 gallons of milk and the farmers were having a great time getting rid of their milk too._

American food was plentiful but many servicemen still hankered for fresh cooked food of their choice.

Peter Winter was an enterprising teenager who was able to help in many ways:

_The Yanks themselves didn’t like the army food, so they used to give us their dixie pan and we’d go down to Sands Café and for two shillings and six pence you’d get steak and eggs. They’d put it in the pan and we’d take it back to the Yanks. They’d give us a ten shilling note, keep the change._

Skeltons Milkbar.
Photo courtesy of Deslie Dolan.
"We were astonished at the way they went down to the water’s edge to taste the water..."

Garth Threlfall

I was earning more money than my father during the war running messages for the Americans.

There were blokes who had been in New Guinea and they used to go out of a night, so they’d pay us kids ten shillings or a pound to get in their bunk and pull the blankets up over our heads because, during the night, the orderly officer would come round with a torch and check that everyone was in their bunk. I did that a few times and was always terrified that I’d get taught but I never did.

Americans were overwhelming in many respects. Cultural differences played out on the beaches where men broke local Council laws by going ‘topless’ and it soon became obvious that entertainment needed to be broadened for the huge influx of men (and some servicewomen) on the coast. Picture theatres began screening on Sundays and Amcros and the military took over their own accommodation and entertainment venues so that they had more control over what could be offered and when. Amcros sought to offer a ‘home away from home’ with all that it represented. Salad bars were introduced along with familiar foods like hotdogs and hamburgers, french fries, milk shakes, spiders, coca-cola and ‘cook-outs’ on the beach.

Celebrations of national events like Thanksgiving and Halloween and the Fourth of July were hosted, and music...
and dance exposed the local community to the freedoms of the jitterbug and the excitement of the big band. Alcohol laws were very restrictive at that time in Australia. Hotels closed at 6pm and alcohol could not be sold in restaurants or where dancing was taking place. These rules did not operate in Australian homes or in the venues managed by AMCROSS.

Sex was an activity that the American military expected to take place and sexual health included the ready availability of condoms by the military to its forces. Local sources indicate that a brothel existed on the northern side of the Thrower Bridge, Currumbin. It is likely that this was given tacit approval as brothels had been in Brisbane, where a number operated with the full knowledge and support of the military and the government. Americans earned the reputation of being overpaid, oversexed and over here!

Garth Threlfall was a boy when the American servicemen arrived, but his family’s contact with two of them was to be lifelong:

**My father and I used to go and help Boyds Brothers, the local net fishermen, whenever the mullet were running and they were pulling the nets on Burleigh Beach. They always threw us a few fish for helping them. One morning we noticed these American soldiers on the beach in their nice uniforms watching us. We were astonished at the way they went down to the water’s edge to taste the water and they wanted to know what we were doing and we wanted to know why they were tasting the water. They came from the central part of America, round Lake Michigan and they’d never seen the sea before and they didn’t know what the salt water tasted like. We got talking and found them very friendly and, in fact, mum invited several of them up to our place for a meal that night. I remember my sister kicking me under the table when they were eating bread and butter and strawberry jam with their fish, which rather amused us. We’d never met Americans before and their different habits interested us. We kept in touch with them. One of them has died now but we still keep in touch with the other one in America.**

American servicemen and local girl Joan Mason in front of Jazzland, Coolangatta. Photo courtesy of Peter Winter.
right through all these generations. They were both called Bob. Bob Buffenberger was the one that’s since died, but Bob Ekkens is the one that we keep in touch with now. When his daughter came along, she used to be a pen pal of my son for years, so they corresponded, and my mother kept in touch with them too until she passed away and now we keep in touch with them. They came out to visit in 1989 when I was working at the Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary.

“I will do everything possible to prevent friction or resentment on the part of the Australian government and people at the presence of American colored troops...”

General MacArthur


Gold Coast Bulletin 18 May 1989
Swimming and lifesaving

A number of American servicemen drowned on leave and this emphasised the need for swimming and lifesaving training. The American Military Police in Coolangatta were trained by Allan Kennedy and Charley Winders (the Mayor’s brother) as lifesavers. The newly trained American lifesavers patrolled Surfers Paradise and Kirra/Coolangatta Beach and the fatality rate decreased.

Black and white servicemen

Segregation between blacks and whites in the American community played out in the military which meant that blacks, who operated under white officers and mostly in service and support roles, were unable to use the R&R facilities on the Gold Coast. General Douglas MacArthur also announced that he would support Australia’s ‘white Australia policy’ which impacted in many ways on the black servicemen who found themselves in Australia.

General MacArthur stated:

*I will do everything possible to prevent friction or resentment on the part of the Australian government and people at the presence of American colored troops ... Their policy of exclusion against everyone except the white race known locally as the ‘White Australia’ plan is universally supported here.*
Despite this a number of black servicemen were present on the Gold Coast for short periods of time during the war years. Peter Winter, a local resident who has written widely on the American forces on the southern Gold Coast, recalls his contact with them:

There was an odd one. One was on a submarine as a cook I think and he was allowed to come because the rest of the submariners said, “If he doesn’t go, nobody goes”, so he went. He was a nice bloke. I remember his name was Sammy. There were about four Negroes come down and they had a car and they picked up some local girls and they went up to Piccabeen. It was a pretty rough gravel road and they were coming down the road and a bus got out of control and one of the dark fellows was killed and the rest they took to the American Hospital at Southport.

Chris Cunningham was the taxi driver and the police and the American officials didn’t have another vehicle, so they hired him to take them up to the accident to see what had happened. They had this poor fellow underneath a blanket on the side of the road and the Americans said, “Okay, we’ll go now. We’ve seen enough”, and Chris Cunningham said, “Well, what about him?” They said, “Don’t worry about him. We’ll get him tomorrow. He won’t go anywhere.” That’s how they treated them. They treated the blacks real bad, so he was picked up the next day.

The American hospital

The 166th Station Hospital officially occupied The Southport School on 1 October 1942. The headmaster, John Norman Radcliffe, reluctantly accepted their arrival. He was concerned about the disruption to the school and the boys’ proximity to patients with infectious diseases. The 153rd Station hospital, commanded by Dr Robert B Hope arrived at the school from New Guinea on 2 March 1943. That year the Australian Civil Construction Corps built
three long single storey ward buildings, an annex to the gymnasium and a large garage. Several tents were erected on the front lawn which came from Wirth’s Circus.

Dr Hope was in charge of the 250 bed unit but his duties extended beyond caring for his patients. He attended the general court martial at Sans Souci, in Surfers Paradise, of Corporal Cooper who had been found guilty of breaking into homes at Southport. As an officer he also attended functions and parties with Australian officers and local civic leaders.

Entertainment and new release American movies were provided which not only helped with morale but also cemented good relationships with invited members of the community.

The 153rd Station hospital moved out by 1944 and a small dispensary was set up at Seahaven, in Surfers Paradise, to service remaining medical needs.

Bill Laver was a young boarder during the American occupation of the school.

Bill Laver remembers much about this unusual time and the things he saw as an impressionable lad:

I remember Mr Pearce was taking us over for cricket practice, heading off with his bat out in front and trailing behind were all these little juniors, 13 or 14 year old boys, and here’s this American with this girl rolling around in the grass and Mr Pearce never stopped. He just kept on walking and we’re all looking.
A property known as The Lodge, a large concrete house situated adjacent to The Southport School at 4 College Street, had been rented over the years for the school’s use. During the American occupation of the junior school and some of the grounds. The Lodge, following some repairs, became the nurses’ quarters. Two additional buildings were also constructed enabling adequate housing for 65 female personnel.

“An American girl means a lot and Paula, Martha, Claudia, Libby and Doris are swell!”

The Rotation Boys

Coolangatta rest area

American service band playing on the grounds of the Hotel Grande Coolangatta, 1943.
Photo courtesy of the State Library of Queensland.
Coolangatta was a leave area for enlisted men and since the Women’s Army Corp (WAC) were stationed in Brisbane it eventually became available to them as well. The first convalescents came in September but things really got under way on 31 October 1942 when 31 men were welcomed by the United States Army Band to the Hotel Grande at Coolangatta.

Preference was given to recuperating servicemen as they had been the primary target for the establishment of the rest areas. As their numbers dropped servicemen with leave from one day to one month could avail themselves of the facilities. The area could officially accommodate 222 people in a range of dwellings.

Block bookings were made by Amcross at the Hotel Grande but the Hotel Coolangatta offered a better deal so the rest home relocated there. Although the Americans were taking over the hotels and favoured drinking spots of the community, uniformed Australians could still drink there. The income the Americans provided filtered down to the local community and accommodation which would otherwise have been vacant due to travel restrictions and fuel rationing was full.

The Women’s Army Corp were billeted in the area and overall numbers swelled with the arrival of servicemen on three day passes. Tents were erected by the engineers to manage the overflow, and the area underneath the Greenmount Surf Pavilion was fitted out with beds. The weekend character of the Coolangatta Club and Leave Area was hectic with so many people on leave. Plans were in place to acquire the Kirrabelle Hotel at Coolangatta (currently the Sands Hotel) for the exclusive use of the Women’s Army Corp but these were abandoned and the women found themselves with no special facilities.

A string of high ranking military men visited the rest area and in March 1944 Mrs MacArthur, the general’s wife, their son and his Chinese amah (nanny) Au Cheu visited with Colonel Huff for three days. They occupied the apartment used by the medical officer and all meals were served to them there.

![Photo courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.](image)

In 1945 the troops were going home and the following letter was written to thank Red Cross staff:

> A group of us arrived at your club about 10 days ago to await transportation back home. At this time we would like to express our thanks to you and your fine staff of Red Cross girls for helping to make this otherwise hectic ordeal a real pleasure. I wonder if you realise how wonderful it is to see attractive and delicious food served after living the way we have for so long.
I think the salad table impressed us the most since we have not seen green vegetables for well over a year. The recreational program has made the time go by amazingly fast. It is so arranged that we can more or less plan ahead what things we would like to do. The Red Cross girls have made us feel welcome and have made the various activities of real interest. An American girl means a lot and Paula, Martha, Claudia, Libby and Doris are swell! We want to say thanks to them and to you, Mr Henning, and the best of luck in the future.

Most sincerely

The Rotation Boys

The Royal Navy took over the American Navy Leave Area at Kirra. They were followed by former Dutch internees from Asia who lived there and at the Greenmount camp.

Surfers Paradise rest area

Records for the Surfers Paradise Rest Area reveal that in 1943 23% of army officers came on sick leave and 77% came without authority or on passes. The latter group included officers who were fatigued and at shore for a few days, ‘weekenders’ who came from Brisbane for recreation and parties, and air force officers awaiting transportation to New Guinea.

Feeding large numbers of people became a problem until the kitchen facilities were improved and the officers’ clubs were encouraged to become as self-supporting as possible. Meals and lodging were paid for by residents with special conditions for convalescents.

Kemper Moore, an American Red Cross director at the Surfers Paradise Officers’ Rest Home, wrote in her report in September 1943:

“This month has been fascinating. It is a marvelous thing to see a man regain his vigour and enthusiasm.”

Kemper Moore
Red Cross Director
fatalist, to a healthy soldier, eager to return to his work. This experience has been ours. There have been many minor recuperations, and for all of this there has been large praise for the place.

A block booking of 25 rooms was reserved at the Surfers Paradise Hotel until other premises were rented that enabled more control by the club director and her staff. However, they retained the use of the Surfers Paradise Hotel guest house for convalescing officers for some time.

Seahaven, a small guest house with a capacity for 20 men became available to officers of the 32 Division on sick leave. The 32 Division was located at Camp Cable, near Logan Village. From 14 November 1942 until 26 February 1943 1055 officers were accommodated.

Having outgrown Seahaven, the rest area spread towards the sea taking in Ludoma, another small guest house accommodating about the same number of servicemen. The two buildings were operated by Mrs Margaret (Peg) Durdin, another Red Cross club director.

In June 1943 a cottage called Franklin, which stood next to Ludoma, was rented which gave a vacant lot between it and Seahaven (which was leased for storage and staff quarters). The vacant lot was eventually transformed into a badminton and volleyball court and a suntrap for sunbathers. This connected the rest area giving the Red Cross three houses and one sports area in a row. From the start the homes were acknowledged as being spartan for recuperating men and adequate supplies of hot water did not become available at Ludoma until 1944.

In December 1943 Sans Souci guest house was turned over to the American Red Cross as a convalescent home. This entitled the
residents to special foods and other benefits, although the base commander still insisted that two rooms be reserved for the top brass. Subordinates would have to vacate them if required by their superiors who, on one occasion, turned out to be a lieutenant-colonel and his bride. Kemper Moore, then its director, could do nothing.\textsuperscript{6}

The acquisition of Monte Video enabled convalescing nurses to rest under the homely charge of Mrs Chandler, an Australian.

By mid to late 1944 American men were not coming to the coast in such large numbers, enabling the nurses (army and navy), Red Cross personnel, dieticians and Women’s Army Corp officers to move from Monte Video to Ludoma and Seahaven where they had more comforts. Comments in the Red Cross reports note:

\begin{quote}
As we are now a women’s club, our program will be somewhat altered. They are in the minority down here, and are quite apt to have dates. We feel that the more American women we have in the locality on leave, the happier will be our social program.
\end{quote}

**War brides**

Between 12,000 and 15,000 Australian women married American servicemen and Colleen Webb from Southport was one of them. American regulations did not encourage these marriages and concerns were voiced about the women’s prospects once they left Australian soil.

Eventually *The War Brides Act* was introduced on 28 December 1945 which waived all visa requirements and provisions of immigration law for all foreign brides of members of the American armed forces.

Colleen Webb (nee Riley) met her husband in 1943 when she was 16 and working in a café next to the Regent Theatre in Southport. Her husband was a nurse at the 153\textsuperscript{rd} Station hospital. They had to wait until she was 18 before they could marry. She had her 21\textsuperscript{st} birthday
in America and made her life there for nine years. She returned to Southport with her husband and family, honoring a promise he had made to her family when she married and left Australia.

The following memo outlines some of the problems for American servicemen and their wives who did marry:

In the following interview excerpt Colleen Webb tells a little of her story:

Well, the average Australians were all right because we had a lot of soldiers in Southport. But you couldn’t walk down the main street. It was shocking. The Australian servicemen would stick their heads out of the pubs and as soon as they saw an American coming with an Australian girl, they’d call them yanks, septic tanks, “You’re only going with him because you can get silk stockings. You’re going with him because of the uniform. You’re going with him because he gets good pay.” I’ve got news for them. We didn’t get good pay because he sent money back to his family.

I arrived over there in the November. I had one child who was 17 months old with me. His parents were so good to me and always good to the kids. I adored Jim and I know it was mutual. I thought this is my life, this is what I’m going to make it.
Endnotes


3. Full interviews are available at the Local Studies Library, Gold Coast City Council, Southport.

4. Information provided by local resident Wilf Ardill.

5. MacArthur Papers, Box 5508 (Series R248/R24a) Greenmount and Coolangatta American Red Cross. Surfers Paradise Officers Club (R24a) held by John Oxley Library, reproduced with permission of the American Red Cross.

6. Ibid

7. National Archives of Australia MP508/1/0 115/701/352, record search barcode 460450.
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Photo courtesy of Joyce Punch