

The Defence of Newcastle 1939–1945

By 1935, it was clear that, in the event of a Pacific war, the Newcastle industrial area, together with the Northern Coalfields and the Port of Newcastle, had become one of the critically important locations requiring a significant local defence capability. The Newcastle Defended Area extended from Port Stephens in the north, south to the entrance of the Tuggerah Lakes and west to Muswellbrook. The key points to be defended were the entrance to Port Stephens itself, the whole of the Stockton Bight beach between Anna Bay and the entrance to the Newcastle Harbour, and the beach areas south to the entrance of Lake Macquarie. In December 1941, this area was defended by four fixed coastal defence forts, two major air bases and four army accommodation and training camps. Three of the forts — Tomaree at the entrance to Port Stephens, Fort Scratchley at the entrance to Newcastle Harbour, and the Park Battery, located on the high ground at the southern end of King Edward Park in the city — were armed with two six-inch (150 mm) calibre guns. This weapon fired a round which weighed 80 pounds (36 kg) to a range of 17 miles (27.3 km).⁴⁴

The fourth fixed defence point was Fort Wallace.⁴⁵ Fort Wallace was positioned between Fort Tomaree and Fort Scratchley, immediately north of the Stockton urban area. This fort was armed with two 9.2-inch (240 mm) calibre guns. These guns fired a round weighing 280 pounds (130 kg) to a range of 35 miles (56.36 km). The guns at all forts, except those at Fort Tomaree, were capable of firing inland as well. A much smaller fortified position, located on the Breakwater at Nobby's, was armed with a six-pounder (2.72 kg) gun to control the entrance to Newcastle Harbour. Each fort was equipped with modern fire-control apparatus, and radar stations were positioned on the summit of the Tomaree Headland and above the Park Battery in Newcastle, to provide electronic surveillance over the sea and air approaches to the Newcastle Defended Area. The Tomaree Fort also included a torpedo-launching system that could cover the whole of the entrance to Port Stephens. In addition, to provide electronic surveillance for the control of defensive and offensive air operations, the Royal Australian Air Force operated radar stations to the north of the Williamtown Air Base at Anna Bay, on Ash Island and at Middle Camp, a position just to the north of the Catherine Hill Bay township.

With the outbreak of war in the Pacific imminent, the Royal Australian Navy established a port examination service in Newcastle Harbour to check arrivals and departures of all shipping. On 1 August 1940, HMAS Maitland was commissioned and served as a naval transit station, manning the port's war signal station, harbour defences and general security, and providing convoy support. Boom nets were installed at the entrance to the harbour for its defence and, in June 1942, a controlled minefield was laid across the harbour approximately 1300 metres west of Nobby's. In August 1942, an indicator loop was laid seawards from the minefield with the indicator loop and minefield controlled from a building located on the Stockton foreshore. The last item contributed by the Royal Australian Navy to Newcastle's defence was the construction and filling of a 5000-ton oil fuel tank on Elizabeth Street in Tighes Hill, together with the installation of the necessary oil-loading pipework connection. From March 1943, this tank provided a fuelling capability for naval ships based at or visiting Newcastle Harbour.⁴⁶

Army accommodation and training camps were located at Rutherford, Largs, Greta and Singleton. Each of these camps, built progressively from mid-1940, provided accommodation and a training area for three to four thousand men. Each camp was positioned to make the best use of available rail- and road-movement facilities, but in an emergency the troops were no more than two days' march from the sea and likely operational areas. Anti-aircraft batteries were positioned at a number of locations in the city suburbs, but were very mobile, easily relocated in and about the approaches to Newcastle and its industries.