

WWII Gun Emplacements, Wagait Beach

Background Historical Information



Prepared by the Heritage Branch, March 2011

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Cover Photo: The battery and observation tower at Waugite Beach, 1944.
(Eric Lukeman Colln. NT Library)

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LOCATION.....	1
3. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW	2
4. SITE DESCRIPTION	9
5. REFERENCES	13

1. Introduction

This background historical information was compiled in January 2007 as part of a heritage assessment report prepared on the WWII Gun Emplacements at Wagait Beach on the Cox Peninsula for the Heritage Advisory Council, as per the requirements under the *Heritage Conservation Act*.

2. Location

The WWII gun emplacements are located on Section 104 (Hundred of Bray), which is on the upper dunes north of Lots 216 and 217 (Section 106) Cox Drive Wagait Beach, Cox Peninsula. Location of the sites is provided at Figures 1 and 2.

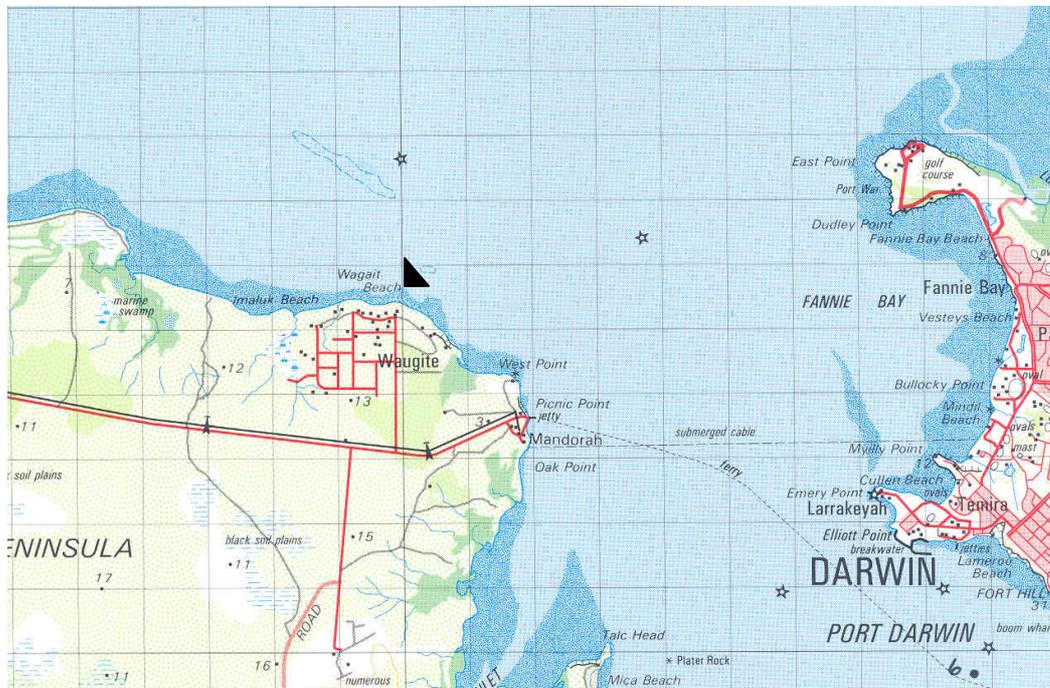


Figure 1. Location of Wagait Beach on Cox Peninsula.

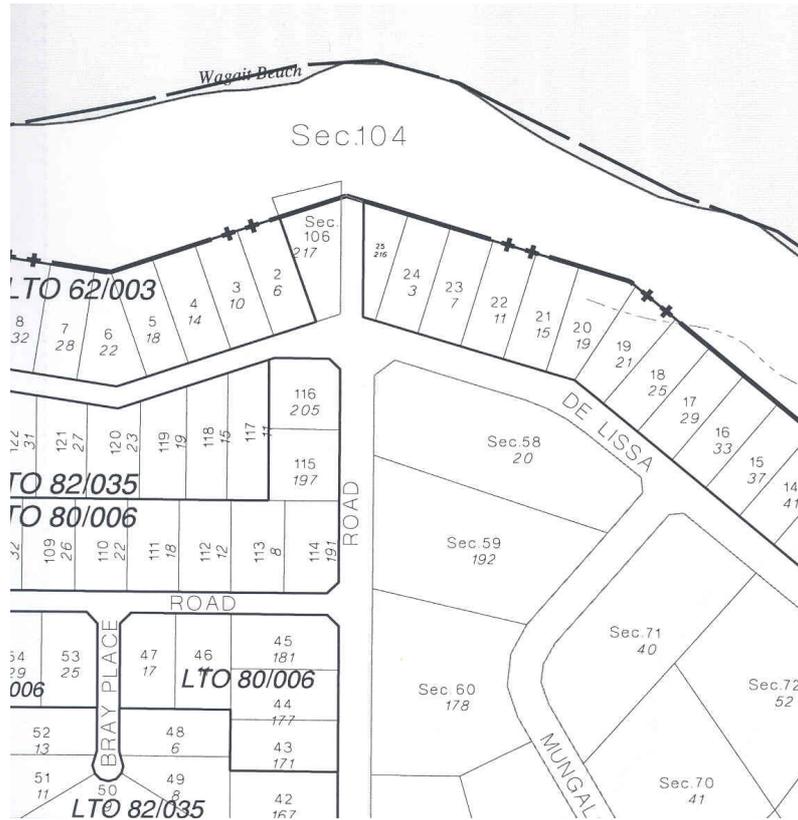


Figure 2. Location of the WWII gun emplacements, Wagait Beach.

3. Historical Overview

Note. Reference to wartime and early postwar publications, records and maps confirms the name as Waugite, however this was changed in the postwar years to Wagait to more accurately reflect the Wagait Aboriginal people. Accordingly both names are used in the context of the period in which events are described.

Origins

The establishment and development of defences at West Point and at Waugite on Cox Peninsula commenced in January 1941 when the Commander Royal Artillery (CRA) and a number of artillery officers inspected a range of sites on the eastern and western sides of Darwin Harbour. The aim of the inspection was to provide suggested improvements to the citing and positioning of fixed defences as part of the Darwin Defence Plan.

Implicit in this was the defence of the anti-submarine boom net, which ran from East Point (just north of Dudley Point) to West Point – just to the north of now Mandorah.

As a result it was suggested that two 4-inch boom defence guns along with a battery of 6-inch guns be installed at West Point and Waugite. The

recommendation was made in the event the promised 9.2-inch guns and equipment failed to arrive.

The establishment of an observation post in the vicinity of the proposed 6-inch battery at Waugite or the proposed 4-inch battery at West Point was also suggested thus providing for an extension of the Fortress range finding system from Nightcliff to West Point.

The 4-inch Boom Defence Battery comprising two Mk VII guns was approved for installation on 18 March 1941, along with an additional battery for East Point. The guns were to be immediately transported from Sydney, however they were to be manned only in 'thick' weather and at night. The personnel establishment for the battery was based on these constraints.

In order to transport personnel and supplies to the proposed new sites by land, a land reconnaissance was carried out from 28 March by 2/11 Field Company Royal Australian Engineers (RAE). The roadworks and camp areas at West Point were carried out by personnel of 2/3 Pioneer Battalion whilst the gun emplacements were poured by men of 2/11 Fd Coy RAE. The 4-inch guns were emplaced by 7 Military District Ordnance personnel and West Point Battery was completed by mid-year. A jetty for landing supplies transported by barge was also proposed.

On 26 June 1941 the nearby Delissaville (now Belyuen) Aboriginal settlement opened under Superintendent Sweeney. The settlement later proved to be a source of reliable young men employed by the military in the area. They also formed a local unit known as the 'Black Watch' under the then Superintendent Jack Murray. From there they reported on any suspicious movements, rescued down Allied pilots and reported on crashed aircraft. A number were also employed on the construction of the West Point and Waugite battery sites and as domestic helpers.

On 22 July 1941 the site for the 6-inch battery at Waugite was pegged out, and shortly after the 4-inch guns were mounted at West Point with a view to them being fully operational by 1 December.

On 11 August 1941 works began on a road to the proposed Waugite site, whilst the availability of a crusher allowed work to all-weather paths at the site itself. The road from West Point, which connected to the main track via the Bynoe Road was completed by 5 September. In October consideration was also given to providing the jetty at West Point to allow more efficient and safer offloading of men and supplies for the batteries there.

By early November work commenced on a 60 foot gun floor shelter at Waugite, though some delays were caused when wet season rains created boggy conditions on the roads. Work also began on clearing the Waugite site of vegetation and breeding areas for mosquitoes to prevent infection and Dengue fever.

On 7 December 1941 the Japanese struck the American fleet and military installations at Pearl Harbour and additional personnel including 2/4 Pioneers were assigned to the protection of the West Point battery area in expectation of Japanese activity in the region. The following day troops from the Fixed Defences began manning the 4-inch guns at West Point.

The West Point Battery was the first of the defence works to be completed on Cox Peninsula to have any defensive capability, while construction work on the Waugite battery site was still underway in early 1942. The first emplacement was not expected to be completed until March – the other had not been started.

In the event the 19 February 1942 raids on Darwin work on the Waugite Battery site ceased for some months.

Post raid – the work drags on

The 19 February 1942 raids on Darwin caused at least 252 deaths, widespread damage in Darwin, the waterfront and at the RAAF Station and a significant loss of aircraft and shipping.

For those personnel at the West Point Battery and Waugite the only thing they could do was watch the attacks from across the harbour and prepare for an expected invasion. Patrols by foot and Bren Carriers were mounted as far west as Charles Point lighthouse and all personnel were placed on alert. A detachment of men from West Point under Lieutenant Cyril Molyneux was also stationed at the lighthouse. (Pers. Comm. Molyneux to Alford 1989)

The Delissaville settlement was also proposed to be shut down as a result of the raids and all Aboriginals evacuated to inland areas where they were employed by the army. In effect, while many were evacuated a small number remained under Jack Murray's supervision until the settlement was closed down in mid-June 1943 and the occupants moved to Katherine.

On 6 June 1943 further planning for the Fixed Defences was made by Major General J. S. Whitelaw. His observations concluded that once the 9.2-inch battery at East Point was completed, two 6-inch Mk XI guns from Left Section at East Point were to be moved to Waugite. They were to be in position by November to cover the channel pending arrival of the 9.2-inch guns and equipment. Two Twin 6-pounder 10cwt gun emplacements were at that time under construction at West Point, with the 4-inch guns were to be moved to East Point once the new emplacements were completed.

By 6 July planning for the Waugite battery had progressed to the stage where the Forward Observation Post (FOP) tower was to be erected. However, a report by the Engineer in Chief, Major General C. S. Steele, stated the "80-foot for FOP at Waugite [is] to serve also as BOP for Waugite Bty; the material is believed to be available as portion of a tower previously fabricated for this site but not delivered.". (Rayner 2001:294)

It was a further three weeks before the Director of Engineering Services (DES) informed the Allied Works Council (AWC) that approval for the works to erect what had originally a radar tower as the battery BOP was approved. The works comprised the inclusion of a searchlight station on top of the tower, along with the installation of Bar & Stroud direction equipment and two Directors. A concrete engine room was to be constructed at the tower base.



Plate 1. Supplies for the construction of the Waugite Battery arriving by barge, July 1942. Eric Lukeman Colln. NT Library.

Despite this the Waugite site remained idle until 18 July 1942, when work on the facilities recommenced. Two days later Signals personnel completed the telephone lines to Waugite. A former Searchlight Battery barracks room at Dudley Point was dismantled and made ready for shipment to the Waugite site and re-erection by the 23rd.

Construction of camp and other infrastructure at Waugite commenced in earnest on 25 July with the erection of the Q Store and other buildings, all of which were covered with camouflage scrim as a priority. In his document, *History of Cox Peninsula*, Mike Foley records that "Construction work was carried out by West Point soldiers in the Waugite Beach area and they also built a waterline which ran from a large soak behind Waugite to West Point, providing the camp with fresh water [though it was not until October 1943 before tests for water at Waugite were carried out and potable water found in a newly dug well]. The work of that gang was back-breaking, having only shovels, axes and picks as tools. Roll call was held in the morning in the feeble glow of a hurricane lamp then work commenced at daybreak and ceased at sunset." (Foley. Chapter, *The Military Occupation of West Point/Waugite Beach*:5)



Plate 2. An accommodation hut at the Waugite Battery site, 1943. Eric Lukeman Colln. NT Library.

By 6 August the camp was completed enough for the camouflage painting of all the huts and buildings to commence. Further works the following week included the arrival by barge of a cruciform gun mount for the battery and a Sidney Williams hut.

There was also some confusion over the plans for the guns at Waugite and at Dudley Point, all centred it seems on whether or not overhead cover would be provided. (Rayner 2001:328) The situation was further confused in early September when DES informed the Chief Engineer NT Force, Colonel O. G. Meyer that the 6-inch guns were to be mounted on cruciform mounts.

On 9 September the West Point and Waugite Batteries were officially designated West Section of Waugite Battery, despite Waugite not being completed but for the camp area. On 15 September DES reported that the final work requiring completion at Waugite was that "The 6-inch guns needed to be placed on the cruciform mountings and magazines of the field type were to be constructed..." (Rayner:346) Both tasks were to be carried out by those manning the site.

By 12 October camouflaging of the Nos. 1 and 2 gun positions were completed, though the mount for No. 2 gun had been set in place but had yet to be finished. By the 21st the mounting had been finally sited and covered. The battery was then ready to receive the two 6-inch guns from East Point. The long awaited Twin 6-pounder 10cwt gun at West Point was proof fired on the 26th and declared ready for action.



Plate 3. The Twin 6-pounder 10cwt battery and observation tower following construction at West Section, 1943. Eric Lukeman Colln. NT Library.

Finally, after many months of work, the two guns were to be installed at Waugite. The first 6-inch gun, No. 2325, was to be removed from East Point on 8 November for transport to Waugite, while the second, No. 2326, was to be moved for transfer on the 15th. (Rayner 2001:375) No. 1 gun was completed and in place on 20 November 1943 and the second, No. 2 gun, two days later.

‘Operational’ at last

Final proof firing of the Waugite guns was carried out on 2 December 1943 and the battery remained on a warning basis for manning, allowing full-time works to continue. The foundations for a 40mm Bofors gun site were commenced a fortnight later and installed on the 26th.

On 25 January 1944, almost two years from the first Japanese raids and three months after the last on 12 November 1943, the Waugite Battery was manned for the first time. It was allocated the counter bombardment-coastal defence role and on the 27th the Battery HQ was transferred from West Point to the new site.

Despite the guns being operational, it was not until 20 March that No. 2 magazine was completed and the site for No. 1 magazine excavated – it was finally completed on 30 April 1944 and the bulk of ammunition transferred from West Point to the Waugite magazines, while camp facilities including showers and washing machines were also completed.

Work on the gun floor and recesses for No. 1 gun was further delayed, with work by Battery personnel not commenced until November.

Trip and alarm wires were also laid around the searchlights there and later augmented by concertina wire, whilst a temporary Directing Station was established for the Section Commander and searchlight personnel.

On 27 March, construction of a new 120ft steel FOP/BOP tower commenced at the Waugite Battery. It was to include Coastal Artillery equipment, a BOP and Directing Station along with sleeping accommodation for the duty operators. A Howard generating set was installed at the battery on 10 June to provide tower warning lights and lighting was also connected to the Battery Office. A Recreation Room was completed by 22 June and power was connected to this, the Canteen and Sergeants' and Officers' Messes on 4 July.

The steel tower was fully completed and occupied by battery personnel for the BOP on 25 June, though DS personnel had commenced operations there on 27 March. The second of two Radio Direction Finding sets, along with a Tactical Control Centre were installed at the BOP on 25 July 1944, and the Battery Plotting Room (BPR) was completed on 16 September.

On 16 August the question of a Coastal Artillery Examination service as part of the Boom Defence was raised, apparently for a second time. It was suggested that the 6-inch battery at Waugite could more efficiently perform the service that the relocated 4-inch guns from West Point battery at Dudley Point, notwithstanding that the nearby Port War Signal Station co-ordinated the examination service. It was contended that Waugite had a greater range and could support the examination vessel more effectively.

The Examination Service at Port War Signal Station gathered and recorded information on the movements of vessels in and out of Darwin Harbour and in cooperation with East Point and later the West Section Batteries could order ships to heave-to for clearance by an examination vessel.

The army and navy agreed to the amendment. The new role was the only active engagement the Waugite Battery had during its shortlived period of service. The new role as Examination Battery came into effect at 0001 hours on 25 September.

During October 1944 further works to the battery were carried out. The installation of equipment in the BPR was completed and the battery was finally fully set up for counter bombardment. Gun floors, recesses and engine room floors were completed; a sports oval cleared and a Sidney Williams hut erected for use as a mortar and small arms ammunition (SAA) store. A 300-gallon water cooler powered by a two 15 KW Lister engines also arrived and was installed in the Recreation Room/Gunners' Mess.

The end in sight

On 9 November 1944 the Defence Committee recommended to War Cabinet that NT Force be directed to reduce the coastal defences at Darwin to two 6-inch guns at Waugite, three Twin 6-pounder 10cwt guns at Dudley Point and West Point, and ten Coastal Artillery Searchlights (CASL). In its role as an

important Fleet Anchorage the status of Darwin as a Defended Port was still warranted and it was further planned that three 5.2-inch Coastal Artillery guns would replace the 6-inch guns and take over the Coastal and A-A defences. The plan was never fully implemented.

In early December further facilities were established at the Waugite camp area, including a spare engine for the 200ft deep, 300 gallon per hour water bore to ensure a continuous supply of fresh water and a 240 Volt supply to camp buildings - a new Battery Office was occupied and the construction of No. 12 Engine Room was completed. By January 1945 No. 13 Engine Room was constructed and both gun floors had been completed. A screen for 35mm movies was installed and a mobile cinema truck made the journey for regular Monday evening shows. Powered fans, wireless and a PA system was also installed and life for personnel at Waugite and West Section became a little more comfortable.



Plate 4. The main camp area at Waugite Battery following the connection to a dedicated power supply. Eric Lukeman Colln. NT Library.

Despite quite dramatic reductions in personnel across a range of units, Waugite Battery continued developing. In June 1945 the gun emplacements were camouflage painted and alarm bells activated from the BOP installed in the camp, watch post and battery areas. Reserve water tanks for the Q Store and Officers' Mess were connected to other tanks to provide for filling during the dry season and two 18-pounder field guns and 1,200 rounds of ammunition were received from Dudley Point Battery. Work was also started on the construction of an oil and paint store.

The developmental works at Waugite Battery were short lived. A further reorganisation of the Coast and A-A defences in Darwin was confirmed on 20 July 1945 in an order issued from Victoria Barracks in Melbourne to NT Force.

The decision of the Defence Committee was that only one 6-inch gun and two Twin 6-pounder 10cwt guns were required to be manned.

The following day the Lister engine was removed from the Waugite tower and sent across to East Point and replaced by a smaller Southern Cross engine. Orders for the reduced manning of coastal artillery was promulgated on 26 July and a range of changes took place as a result. No. 2 6-inch gun, No. 13 CASL and No. 13 Engine Room became 'equipments in reserve' and the battery was allocated the role of a single gun Examination Battery. The Fire Control Post (FCP), radar and other equipment were to receive only care and maintenance.

The day the Japanese surrendered, VJ-Day 15 August 1945, the 18-pounder guns were pulled out of Waugite and transported to HQ Darwin Fixed Defences to take part in firing a victory salvo, whilst battery personnel shared in the two bottles of beer per man authorised by Major General J. J. Murray. The two days, 15 and 16 August were also declared rest days for all troops.

Four days later the mortar equipment, ammunition and a recently installed Lister engine were removed and placed in storage. In early September HQ NT Force was advised that only one FCP, two Twin 6-pounder 10cwt guns, one 6-inch gun and five CASLs were required for the Darwin Coastal Artillery and that manning was to be a minimum of personnel enough to cover requirements.

The Waugite Battery and West Section remained 'operational' for only a short period following war's end and both were abandoned later that year. The Waugite Battery had not fired a shot in anger and its major contribution to Darwin's defences were as an Examination Battery and participant in a number of practice shoots, all too late in the war to fulfil its planned function.

4. Site Description

The remains of the Waugite Battery are confined to a precinct of sites that collectively form the main battery site. These elements are described moving clockwise from Gunsite No. 2:

- Gunsite No. 2 – a reinforced concrete emplacement 4.6m in diameter comprising the gun floor and its cruciform mounting with top plate to the gun mount removed, ready-use ammunition recesses, and access way. The eastern aspect to the gun floor has collapsed and the ready-use ammunition recesses have collapsed with it - suggested to have been caused by foot and other traffic to the beachfront;
- A concrete foundation slab located due east of Gunsite No. 2 – measuring 4.8m x 2.1m with a rock edged semi-circular entry on its eastern aspect, it is suggested to have been gun crew accommodation or the Battery Office;
- Gunsite No. 1 – an intact site identical in form and construction to Gunsite No. 2, but with top plate to the gun mount extant;

- A machine gun post comprising a c.g.i. tank 2.8m dia. buried to its upper rim, located east of Gunsite No. 1;
- A disrupted concrete foundation slab 5m x 5m located SSE of Gunsite No. 1, suggested to be part of the wartime camp and administrative area – the slab has been partially destroyed to accommodate fencing and land clearing to Lot 24;
- The concrete engine room and base to the Battery Observation Tower converted to a living space with extensions; and
- A machine gun post comprising a c.g.i. tank 2.8m dia. buried to its upper rim, located southwest of Gunsite No. 2 and filled with gravel.

The Gunsites have some areas of spalling, or 'concrete cancer', particularly in the roofing of the ammunition recesses, however this is minimal and reflects to a large degree on the integrity of the original construction in what is a harsh foreshore environment.

Only the gun emplacements were nominated to the NT Heritage Register, and accordingly the base to the Battery Observation Tower has not been assessed. However, the remaining elements provide a context for the precinct as a whole and are included for the purposes of demonstrating the layout of the wartime battery site.

The disposition of these elements is provided at Figure 3, whilst a plan of Gun site No. 1 is provide at Figure 4.

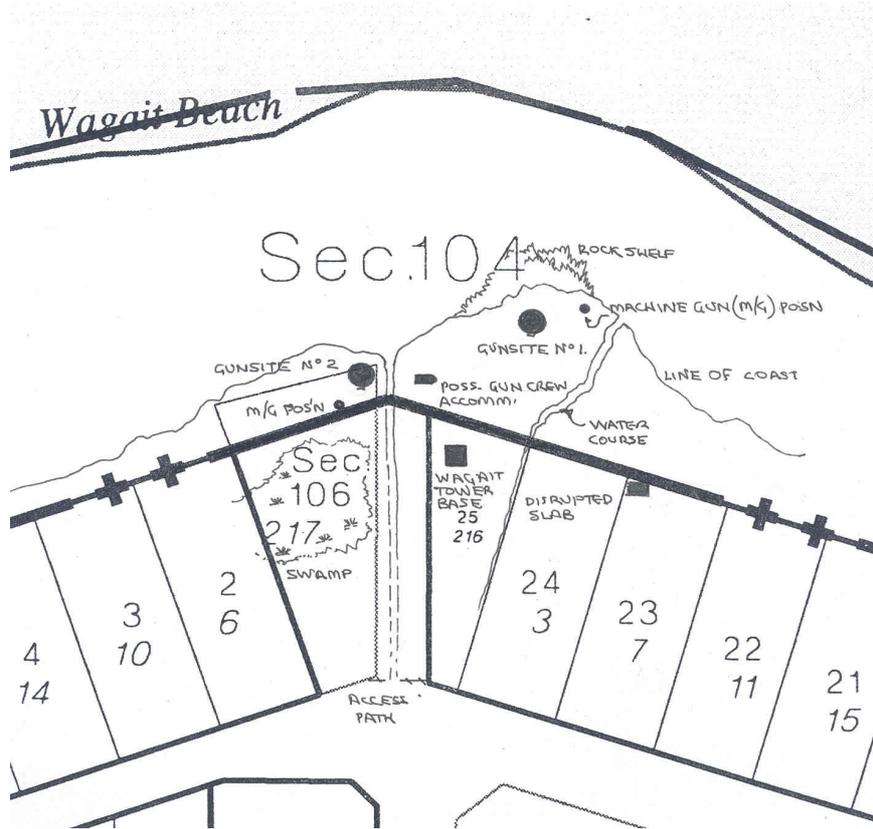


Figure 3. Disposition of the remaining elements of the Waugite Battery.

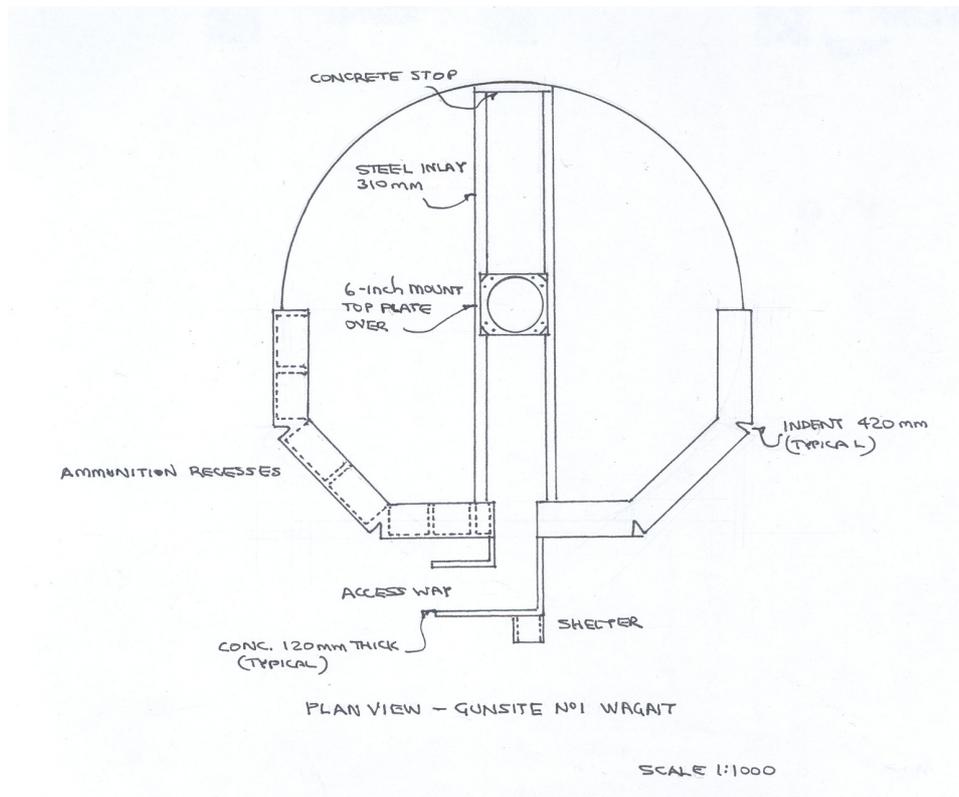


Figure 4. Plan view of No. 1 Gunsite, Wagait Beach. January 2007.



Plate 5. Gunsite No. 2 viewed E-W, and showing collapsed ready-use ammunition recesses



Plate 6. Gunsite No. 2 viewed N-S showing exposed gun mount, cruciform inlay and ready-use ammunition recesses. Partially collapsed gun floor is at extreme left.



Plate 7. Foundation slab with semi-circular entry viewed E-W, with No. 2 Gunsite at rear.



Plate 8. No. 1 Gunsite viewed W-E.



Plate 9. Gun floor of No. 1 Gunsite viewed N-S, showing steel cruciform inlay and central gun mount with top plate.



Plate 10. View N-S from Gunsite No. 1 to the converted BOP tower base and engine room at rear.



Plate 11. Machine gun position in foreground with No. 1 Gunsite on rise at rear.



Plate 12. View N-S over Gunsite No. 2 to former BOP tower base.

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