

MT ETNA CAVES 'IN THE WARS'

– Dianne Vavryn

Some weeks ago, members of the Australian Bunker and Military Museum Society (ABMMS), whose museum is at Maryborough in Queensland, contacted the local Queensland Parks and Wildlife (QPW) office in Rockhampton, with a view to visiting certain caves on Mt. Etna that were used by the Australian Army during the Second World War.

The Society is in the process of organising a reunion for veterans who served as commandos in 'Z Special Unit' during the war. Of the original 900, about 80 remain – all of whom are in their 80's and 90's. The Society members wished to take a video to present at the reunion, and also to search for relevant artefacts in the caves.



L to R: ABMMS members Stephen Charteris, Jason Sim, and Craig Brown in Commando Cave, with Dianne Vavryn.

It is useful to quote from the book *Mt. Etna Caves* (University of Queensland Speleological Society, 1970):

During World War Two, Johannsen's Cave was utilized as a munitions store. Mt Etna became the secret training base for commando troops of Z Special Unit, being trained in the use of limestone caves deep within enemy territory. Captain S. Carey (later Professor of Geology at the University of Tasmania) was in charge of several cave schools which were conducted between 1943 and 1945.

Under Carey's direction the troops mapped Johannsen's Cave and five others on Mt. Etna. Two of these in particular – Labyrinth Cave (now known as Main Cave) and The Cathedral (since known as Commando Cave) were used for the training operation.

The commandos carried out the mapping with a twenty foot long piece of cord, a compass and a five foot pole. Lessons in survival included catching drips of water from stalactites. Little damage was caused and only a few old cases and torch batteries remain as evidence of their presence. The commandos' Mt Etna maps included surface contours. and the caves have roof heights and spot floor heights shown. The men did an excellent job considering the simplicity of the instruments used.



Australian Bunker and Military Museum Society member Jason Sim in Main Cave.

About eight to nine groups (with ten commandos per group) used the caves over a year. The training was deemed necessary in that the Japanese were using 'similar' caves on Java and Sumatra as shelters. The trainee troops lived underground and conducted exercises in defending the caves. Eventually, the realisation dawned that defensive training was not overly useful, and so they were subsequently used for 'toughing-up' exercises.

On Saturday 1 August, QPW rangers Dan Beard and Dianne Vavryn led a group of three ABMMS members up Mt. Etna to visit Commando and Main Caves, to enable them to record their video. Several artefacts were noted, including an old wooden box and badly deteriorated hessian in Commando Cave, and an old rusted ladder and a few broken bottles in Main Cave. Happily, very little damage appears to have been caused by the military use – evidently as the army was environmentally aware, and also because it was conscious of 'leaving nothing in a cave that the enemy might find'. The group was most appreciative of the trip, and we all lunched together at The Caves Pub after the morning excursion. For more details, see:

<<http://australianbunkermilitarymuseum.org>>



The group with Mt. Etna in the background.