

Captain Austin, Sergeant Barnett, and birds on Mt Bartle Frere, 1945

By Elinor C. Scambler and A. Frank Austin Jnr

Introduction

During WW2, a network of new and upgraded roads improved access to natural areas in far north Queensland, but there were significant barriers to civilians engaging in natural history interests. Apart from the struggle to work and manage family life in wartime conditions, petrol was rationed; there were severe restrictions on civilian movements; and possession and use of binoculars and cameras were limited (well-known ornithologist and writer Keith Hindwood gave up seabird surveys in Sydney, after he was arrested twice for using binoculars near a secure area). Conversely, troops training in the far north were thrust into every possible habitat, from beaches to woodlands and tropical rainforest at all altitudes.

Two military ornithologists

Among the many thousands of troops quartered on the Atherton Tablelands during WW2, a few were dedicated ornithologists. Captain Austin Frank Austin (known as Frank: 1914-1945) was Reconnaissance Officer for 'C' Squadron 2/9 Armoured Regiment, based in Wondecla from mid-1944 to March 1945. A station manager, raised in a renowned NSW Riverina grazing family, Frank was interested in birds from age eight and (like many young boys at that time) began identifying birds and collecting eggs. He joined the RAOU (Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union) at age 16, guided visiting ornithologists to photograph birds around the family property in 1939, and was thanked as one of four members making 'substantial donations' to the Union during WW2. On reaching the far north he was aware

that the Atherton Tablelands was a special area, and that there had never been a comprehensive list of its birds: "It must be accepted", he wrote, "that we lack much information of the avifauna living in this fascinating area". Army training was intensive and free time was short: he began writing down "chance observations in camp or on training exercises or during rambles on one's cherished weekly 'rest day'".



Captain (then Lieutenant) Austin Frank Austin (1914-1945), c. 1942. Green Studios, Brisbane. National Library of Australia, *Portrait of A.F. Austin*, G.M. Mathews Collection of Portraits of Ornithologists.

Some 'rambles' were made with 'C' Squadron Sergeant Arthur Maurice Michael ('Bluey') Barnett (1916-2004): "After church parade I went out with one of our Sgts who is interested in

birdlife. Had a most interesting day...” Like Frank, Arthur’s attraction to birds’ nests may have begun early: at age seven he was injured falling out of a tree climbed on his way home from school in New Norfolk, Tasmania. In other respects their lives were strikingly different. Arthur was the only boy of seven children. Their father, a small farmer suffering from advanced tuberculosis, committed suicide in 1923 and their mother died three years later. An uncle took responsibility for the youngest girls but Arthur, aged nine, and his two eldest sisters were committed to care. At the Kennerley Home (Hobart Boys' Home and Industrial School) he received a Governor’s Prize in 1928 and in 1935 was placed to work with a dairy farmer, who thought highly of his work and character. In the same year Arthur spent most of a £5 legacy from an aunt on a full set of upper and lower dentures ‘so he can join the Navy’, but he worked as a (timber?) millhand until enlisting in the army in June 1939, before the outbreak of WW2. In 2/9 Armoured Regiment he was an armament specialist, a skilled position.



Sergeant Arthur Maurice Michael ‘Bluey’ Barnett (1916-2004), c. 1936. Photographer unknown: source, Ancestry.

As well as taking notes on the distribution of bird species and their behaviour for a proposed article on Tablelands birdlife, Frank shot (with a .303 rifle and handmade light cartridges) 39 birds, prepared as specimens (‘skins’). These were valuable contributions to the Australian Museum in Sydney, and Arthur is listed as co-collector for 18 of the specimens. Their collecting

philosophy was explained in the published article (produced by Pat Bourke, a colleague, post-war, including Austin’s records):

Most of our records are from sight observations, unsubstantiated by specimens...where some doubt existed as to identity, specimens were taken, but this was not our usual practice. Thus, because of our dislike of what we considered unnecessary killing (and some may condemn us for our sentimentality), we remained uncertain as to the identity of some birds...

Even so, Frank and Arthur’s collecting activities did not go unnoticed: 2/9 Armoured Regiment at Wondecla had an in-house social newsletter, *The Ninth News*, produced on a stencil-type machine, much of it fairly facetious. In the issue for December 1944:

Enquiries received during the week were as follows: ... (2) Why have the birds suddenly disappeared from ‘C’ Squadron area since the return of a certain Captain?

Mt Bartle Frere and Bromfield Swamp, 27 February – 3 March 1945

As well as Frank’s ‘chance notes and rambles’, “one expedition with bird study as the object was made to the summit of Mt Bartle Frere taking in Bromfield swamp on the way”. On 26 February he wrote to his wife Helen:

Am off in the morning for some mountaineering. We propose climbing the highest mountain in this part of the world. Am most anxious to examine it from a bird point of view as it has not so far been hunted [=searched] systematically. 8 of us are actually going in the climbing party...Quite excited about it. Have a good team with me. Even if I find nothing really rare or new I shall obtain a lot of info for the article.

Despite Frank’s focus on birdlife, this trip was official:

Wondecla, 26 Feb: Capt F AUSTIN Lt G DOW and 7 ORs [Other Ranks] m/o [marched out, i.e. left the unit quarters, not necessarily on foot] to climb Mt BARTLEFRERE [sic] and Recce Area.

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Arthur Barnett was one of the 'ORs'. They left Wondecla in a truck at 0630h 27 February, spending the day at Bromfield Swamp. Most of this swamp, near Malanda, was declared a Bird Sanctuary by the owners in 1935: Frank undoubtedly had the owners' permission, as it was declared out of bounds for troops including 2/9 Armoured Regiment, e.g. during Exercises 'Festive' and 'Rampant' in December 1944. At about 1600h, the group set up camp at the base of Mt Bartle Frere; there had been heavy rain. The next morning (28 February) six of the party began the climb, with two staying behind to operate the wireless (see below).

It was typical jungle country all the way and seemed to us to go straight up. Rained most of the way and we were covered with leeches. Packs were heavy too and we carried a blanket & ground sheet each. At what we thought was about 200' from the summit we halted in a large cave where we were sure of a dry camp. Climbed an enormous rock and had a wonderful view of the country thousands of feet below. I hunted [=searched] till time for the evening meal and obtained an interesting record [=specimen] of a Silvereye for this part of the world. The greatest hindrance to movement was not the gradient but the enormous granite boulders – piled

one on another with trees and creeper entwined amongst them. Returned to the cave to find a raging fire and some tea. We managed to get dry – the first time since early that morning. Sleep that night was fitful as earth was hard below and during the night it rained inches which blew in onto me.

Next morning [1 March] we climbed with light packs reached the summit (much further than we had thought). Vegetation changed altogether (temperate type of stuff – gnarled old twisted trees – lichen & moss etc). Could have spent a long time there but had to move down about 4 to the cave. Second night's sleep was better – made a mattress of leaves etc. By the way the view from the top was poor. We were up above the clouds – saw nothing.

From the summit, using the backpack unit 108 Mk II, they connected to the wireless at their camp below and back to base at Wondecla. On 2 March they descended the mountain and returned to Bromfield Swamp for another day, where Frank and Arthur saw new birds and collected two specimens (in addition to the Silvereye from Mt Bartle Frere summit); they were back at Wondecla for lunch on 3 March. Birds recorded on the mountain are listed below (bird names and order from BirdLife Australia, successor to the RAOU; notes from A. F. Austin).

Common name	Notes
Wompoo Fruit-Dove	Near the summit, 5000 ft
Australian Swiftlet	Large numbers at 4200 ft in late February, hawking for insects and calling loudly
Rainbow Bee-eater	Large flocks, apparently on the move, March 1st 1945
Australian King-Parrot	Plentiful on the summit
Black-eared Catbird	4800 ft
Tooth-billed Bowerbird	Near 5000 ft
Golden Bowerbird	Fairly common on the slopes, and a number of bowers were found
Eastern Spinebill	On the summit
Yellow-throated Scrubwren	High on Mt Bartle Frere
Large-billed Scrubwren	On the summit, 5250 ft*
Mountain Thornbill	On the summit, 5250 ft
Pied Currawong	One of the most common birds in the temperate forest on the summit
Silvereye	Near the summit; feeding on fruit on topmost branches of a jungle tree
Mistletoebird	On the summit, 5250 ft

*The summit of Mt Bartle Frere South Peak, the highest in Queensland, is 5285'

The military objective was also a success: the Signals Officer of 2/9 Armoured Regiment reported on 2 March 1945:

'C' Squadron conducted a very successful exercise from BARTLE FRERE mountain back to Regt. The link was No 19 Mk II set at Regt, another at base of BARTLE FRERE and a borrowed 108 Mk II pack set which was carried to the top of this 5600' feature. When comms est [communications established] from Regt to base we received msg to listen out for the pack set and received it R4 both ways. Considering the distance, 24 miles airline, this was no mean feat of operating, especially as the pack set was operating in jungle. A normal length of wire about 20' used and worked very satisfactorily.

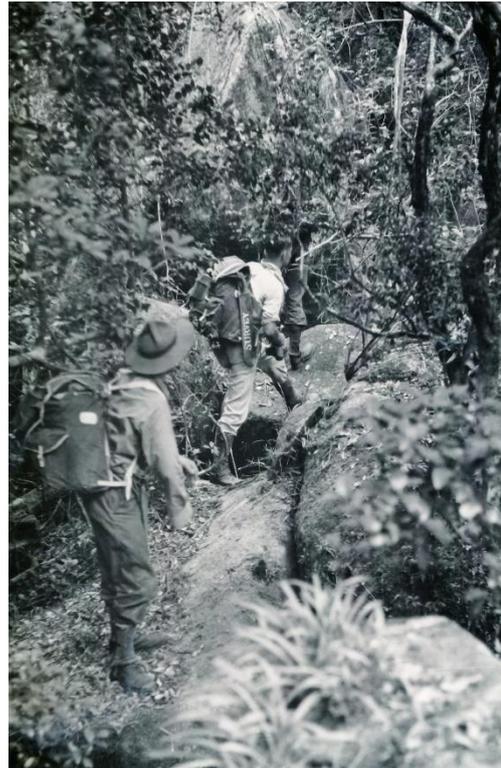
Military 'vandals', September 1945

By contrast, at least one military party ascending the mountain 'signalled' their arrival at the summit in an environmentally (and one would think, militarily) reckless manner. On 28 September 1945, the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* reported:

Soldiers climb Mt Bartle Frere. An unusual sight rewarded fortunate observers on a recent night just after dark. A big grass fire was observed close to the top of Mt Bartle Frere. It was semi-circular in shape and with the flanks more advanced than the centre. A smaller fire was seen right at the top, no doubt the camp fire. It was learnt that a military party left Malanda about 8.30 in the morning and they signalled their arrival by lighting the fire. It speaks well for the prowess of our soldiers, who, in addition to travelling over 30 [miles?] had ascended the highest mountain in Queensland.

Dr Hugo Flecker of the North Queensland Naturalists' Club was outraged and in his regular column for the *Cairns Post* on 19 October, called for disciplinary action:

Bartle Frere ablaze. One of the worst instances of vandalism in this district has been reported from Malanda...Although to the unthinking and irresponsible it may be regarded as having "rewarded fortunate observers", to many others it is a national disaster that such a unique feature as the summit of this celebrated mountain should be burnt out, and its special botanical features lost...Doubtless steps will be taken by those in authority to severely discipline those responsible for this tragedy.



Survey crew climbing the western slope of Mt Bartle Frere through boulders and rainforest at 4000', 1964. Image P38032, Cairns Historical Society collection

Dr Flecker (1884-1957) had climbed Bartle Frere from the eastern approach before WW2, on botanical expeditions. He was a WW1 veteran and in 1945 was serving (part-time) as a Major in the Australian Army Medical Corps: he was well aware of military protocols and good practice. He wrote on 16 November: "It is urgently hoped that further parties will not repeat the reprehensible practice of setting fire to the bush to attract the attention of those at lower levels, such as was done recently." It is unknown whether disciplinary action was taken; Japan had surrendered in August and discipline amongst troops still serving in north Queensland may have been



Vegetation and boulders on Mt Bartle Frere summit, October 2013. Image courtesy Anders Zimny

relaxed. Frank would certainly have agreed with Dr Flecker, who he described as “a remarkable old boy and wonderful botanist”. Dr Flecker identified bird food plants for Frank, and wrote an ecological introduction for the planned paper on Tablelands birds.



Backpack wireless transceiver 108 Mk II, the first portable wireless set in Australia, introduced 1940. Courtesy National Military Vehicle Museum, Edinburgh Parks, South Australia, Signals Collection

Tarakan, and post-war publications

Three weeks after the Mt Bartle Frere expedition, 2/9 Armoured Regiment was deployed for active service on Tarakan Island, Borneo. Before embarking, Frank posted his draft text to another military ornithologist, Corporal Patrick ('Pat') Albert Bourke (1916-1988: 2/13 Infantry Battalion), who was also compiling bird notes: they had agreed to collaborate. However six weeks after leaving Cairns, on 10 May, Frank was killed in action on Tarakan.² After discharge, Pat Bourke returned to teaching in NSW and in 1947 he combined their north Queensland bird records in two joint papers in *Emu*, journal of the RAOU: one on the avifauna of the Atherton Tablelands, and one on Macleay's (Double-eyed) Fig-Parrot, a tiny rainforest parrot found only in the Wet Tropics bioregion. Both papers became classics of the literature of north Queensland ornithology and also influenced the 1958 revision of the Cayley field guide '*What Bird is That*'. Arthur remained on Tarakan with 2/9 Armoured Regiment until November 1945, and on discharge returned to Tasmania. It is not known if he ever joined a bird society, or continued birding activities in his later life working as an upholsterer.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Anders Zimny for permission to use the photograph of Mt Bartle Frere summit, and to the Australian Military Vehicle Museum, Edinburgh Parks, South Australia, for the image of the wireless transceiver 108 MkII.

Sources: Quotations from Captain A. Frank Austin are from family letters and draft bird notes 1944-1945, held by the Austin family. A referenced version of this paper is available in the archive of the Cairns Historical Society.

¹ This makes a party of nine. The additional person to Austin's team of eight would be the truck driver. Officers and NCOs were not supposed to drive vehicles, as drivers were provided. When they set up camp in heavy rain at the start of the climb, Austin wrote: 'I could not get the truck back owing to the slippery road': presumably the plan was for the truck driver to drop them off and return to base, then pick them up after the climb.

² A poem was written commemorating his death, and that of two others: War Graves On Tarakan. *The Argus* (Melbourne), Saturday 23 June 1945: 9. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/971003>.