



AUSTRALIAN ANGLICAN
CHURCH CALENDAR

Coomalie Chapel, NT



Coomalie Chapel is simply and beautifully built. It stands in tranquil tropical surroundings 90 km south of Darwin.



By contrast, however, during the Second World War this place housed the teeming runways and facilities for a vital northern Australian air force base. From 1942 it was a key reconnaissance site and the home base for 31 Squadron Beaufighter aircraft flying constant sorties to drive back invasion by the Japanese.

Crew members of the No. 31 Squadron Beaufighter at Coomalie in January 1943 are pictured here.



At its peak the Coomalie airfield housed 450 RAAF personnel. Experiencing, one can well imagine, all the surging drama of front-line attack and defence and the chilling impact of many casualties.

Robin Page took this photo of the airstrip as it looks today.

It is said that the stationed airmen saved money to build a Squadron bar. But they changed their collective mind and gained approval from the chaplain Padre Bill Dunbar to build a chapel, specifically in memory of their fallen comrades.

The open-air style chapel was constructed from bush timber and corrugated iron with an earth floor and local stone altar steps.

The first service took place in December 1943. Padre Dunbar wrote a dedication prayer, and an airman accompanied the hymns on a cello.

It appears the chapel's popularity was maintained: dozens of people attended regular services.

As it happens, a Coomalie pilot flew the last sortie of the war: headed for Timor he learnt of the Japanese surrender on his radio and turned home. There must have been much singing and thankfulness! Pictured here below is the first chapel at Coomalie.



After the fliers departed, the chapel was all but destroyed by the elements. By great good fortune, its location was acquired as farm land by Richard Luxton, then Head of the Faculty of Architecture at Darwin University. He and some of his students, establishing its dimensions and using a single photograph as reference, were able to recreate the chapel, in comparable though more durable materials, as a remarkable replica as we see today in our Australian Anglican Christian Calendar. In 1993 the project received the J G Knight Conservation Award, followed by a national Special Recognition Award from the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Mr Luxton is said to have remarked that the project cost all of \$2,000 and was probably the most satisfying building he had done in his life!



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The memory of Coomalie Chapel is treasured in the archives of the RAAF 31 Squadron, now stationed in Wagga NSW.

The RAAF connection with the restored building is particularly kept alive through yearly services held there on 15 July, the anniversary of VJ Day.

Anglican priest of the Northern Territory, Ian McDonald who has conducted such services, movingly recalls the chapel's strange kind of power, as though it were 'sacred country', set in a profound silence punctuated only by occasional birdcalls.