



Commander E.A. FELDT OBE, RAN

[1899 – 1968]



Commander Feldt was the Secretary of the Club in 1946 and 1948

Eric Augustas Feldt was born on 3 January 1899 at Cardwell, Queensland. He was the eighth child of Swedish-born parents Peter Nilsson Feldt [1853-1939], a cane farmer, and his wife Augusta (née Blixt) [1862-1951].

He was educated at Cardwell and was awarded a scholarship to board at Brisbane Grammar School in 1912.

He won selection for the 1913 entry of cadets into the Royal Australian Naval College (then at Geelong and subsequently at Jervis Bay). He was chief cadet-captain and gained colours for rugby union and athletics before graduating as a midshipman in January 1917 – the first Queensland to graduate from the College.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

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He was sent to England and served on HMS *Canada*, HMS *Victory* and HMAS *Swordsman* - in which he returned to Australia. He was promoted lieutenant in February 1920 and in January 1921 served on HMAS *Melbourne*. He resigned in October 1922 and was placed on the Retired List.

In January 1933 he married Nancy Lynette (née Echlin) [1897-1985], a journalist, in Brisbane. They remained childless. When in Queensland, they lived at Clayfield Chelmer and New Farm.

In February 1923 he became a clerk in the public service of the mandated Territory of New Guinea. He became a Patrol Officer ("kiap") then a District Officer and served in different parts of the Territory. In 1935 he became Warden (Morobe Goldfields) and then lived at Wau as the Territory's Chief Mining Warden - supervising inspectors, geologists, and surveyors. The giant Bulolo Gold Dredging Ltd was one of the companies under his jurisdiction.

In 1928 he had been promoted Lieutenant Commander and transferred to the Emergency List in 1939, and shortly after he was appointed Staff Officer (intelligence), Port Moresby. His assignment was to activate and extend the coast watching screen across the North-Eastern approaches to Australia. He visited key sites in Papua, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides, meeting coast watchers and bringing officials and civilian planters into the service.

In May 1941 he was appointed Supervising Intelligence Officer, North-Eastern Area in Townsville. When the Japanese entered the war in December, the coast watchers showed their worth by transmitting warnings of air-raids to defenders in Rabaul—before its capture in January 1942—and then to those in Port Moresby; and to the US forces after they captured Guadalcanal. "Guadalcanal saved the Pacific, and the intelligence signalled from Bougainville saved Guadalcanal," said Admiral William Halsey, Commander of the US Pacific Fleet. Long after the war ended, Halsey said, "I could get down on my knees every night and thank God for Commander Eric Feldt."

From early 1942, the majority of the coast watchers were in enemy territory. Difficulties in supplying them with stores and equipment (despite the efforts of the RAAF) and a lack of staff compounded the difficulties of operations. The stress and strain of the job began to affect Feldt's health, and in March 1943 he suffered a coronary thrombosis. After recovering, Feldt was stationed in Brisbane and carried out duties with the Allied Intelligence Bureau. The AIB was located at "Craigroyston" on the corner of Bowen Terrace and Harcourt Street New Farm. He had been promoted Acting Commander in July 1942 but reverted to his substantive rank in August 1943. In February 1945 he was appointed Naval Officer-in-Charge, Torokina, Bougainville, and in May regained the rank of Acting Commander. Returning to Brisbane in June, he was demobilized on 29 September 1945 with the wartime rank of Commander. He had been appointed an O.B.E. in 1944. He transferred to the Retired List in 1959.

Feldt's Coastwatchers also rescued 75 prisoners of war, 321 shot-down Allied airmen, 280 shipwrecked naval personnel, 190 missionaries and civilians, uncounted Papua New Guineans and Islanders, and 260 Asians who had put their own lives in danger. A Port Moresby memorial to the 36 Australian Coastwatchers who died in service reads: "They waited and warned and died that we might live".

Feldt retired from the New Guinea administration in 1945 and lived in Brisbane – at Clayfield and then at Chelmer. In 1946 he published *The Coast Watchers* (Melbourne), the definitive story of the service.

He was appointed Secretary of the Club in 1946, succeeding Captain R.B. Thomson RD, RNR. He was succeeded in 1947 by Captain L G Hitchcock, who resigned in June 1948 and "the invaluable" Feldt stepped into the gap until the appointment of Flight Lieutenant J.D. Riddall at the end of the year.

Commander Feldt died of myocardial infarction on 12 March 1968 at his New Farm home and was cremated; his ashes were scattered at sea near the Coastwatchers' Light, Madang, Papua New Guinea.



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During his tenure, Commander Feldt served Presidents Little and Reid.

Sources included:

- Various web pages
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports, and sundry documents
- *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 14, (MUP), 1996
- NAA
- AWM