

Media Release

The Darwin Raids should be remembered - nationally

by Dr Tom Lewis of the Darwin Military Museum

Another 19th of February has passed with little attention from the southern capitals. Why this is so remains a mystery. In Darwin on that day in 1942, 251 people were killed. It remains one of the largest losses of life in a single event for our nation, eclipsed only by the deaths at sea of 645 Australians on board *HMAS Sydney* in 1941, and the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* – a ship carrying POWs off Rabaul in July 1942, in which 1050 Australians were killed.

But if the deaths of those of our countrymen were not enough the Darwin raids have a huge significance. Through that event we suddenly saw that war could come across our moat to strike us. The age of the aircraft had arrived and we could be bombed from the air. Australia was suddenly fighting for its life.

On that day our nation changed in another way. We were part of the British Empire, but that collection of countries was already fighting for its survival a world away. Britain and its farflung forces – including our own troops – could do little to help the daughter nation. But America could, and it did. We had fought alongside Americans before, in the Western Front in WWI. Now they were here for us: the entire air defence of Darwin on that day was flown by



Americans in Kittyhawk fighters. In the harbour, 91 of her sons died on one destroyer, the *USS Peary*. Three of the 10 ships sunk on the day were in American service. Over the coming years thousands of Americans would pass through Australia to push back a totalitarian enemy who would have otherwise crushed us once they had taken New Guinea. Our nation had a new friend and a new alliance that continues today.

Is there not a sense of pride in what took place in Darwin? Too many writers have taken delight in pointing out – or making up – problems in the defence. But contrary to what some say, our people fought well. The town was prepared: 18 anti-aircraft sites, many machine guns and the 45 ships' weapons managed to bring down around six aircraft. Although the strike was massive: 188 aircraft in the first attack, and 54 in the second, compared to Pearl Harbor, where the same ships and planes were employed by the enemy, the damage was much less. 251 people were killed compared to 2388; 10 ships here compared to more than 20 there. Around 7000 defenders in Darwin had much to be proud about. In fact they had already repulsed the first attempt to close off the port the previous month. Four 80-man enemy submarines were repulsed and one of them was sunk by our corvette *HMAS Deloraine* it remains outside the harbour today. The carriers were the second effort to deny Darwin its role.

There have been allegations of bad behaviour after the raids. But not one soldier was charged with desertion, and tearing up bedsheets from abandoned hotel to clean out red-hot gun barrels is not looting. Indeed, 26 decorations for soldierly actions on the day were handed out.

But what happens on 19 February every year? The Darwin City Council, the Northern Territory Government, and the Australian Defence Force make a magnificent effort, with flyovers, a short drama piece; a ceremony with songs and speeches, and they make every effort to welcome the veterans of the Darwin years. But on radio stations around the country almost no mention is made. Newspapers rarely cover the event or what it commemorates.

The Darwin Military Museum proposes instead that the ABC be asked to pause nationally at 9.58am on that day, to read out a summary of the events, the text of which will be supplied by the Darwin organisers. A few days beforehand newspapers will be sent a story, different every year, which they will be encouraged to feature prominently. Schools should mention the event in their daily news.

Out of a population of around seven million in 1945, by war's end nearly a million people had served in the forces. With the most concerted effort we have ever made as a nation, and our good friends and allies, we had pushed back the enemy tide.

But we are indeed forgetting the first time Australians, and not just a few, were killed on our nation's soil and while defending it. It is time to remember the first Darwin air raids as a nation.

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Dr Tom Lewis OAM is the Director of the Darwin Military Museum, and a military historian whose book *A War at Home* covers the events of the first two Darwin raids.

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