

Australians remember bombing of Darwin



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I was doing research on nurseryfish in the Adelaide River outside of Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia when the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, occurred. I was comforted by the thoughtful comments of my Australian friends in subsequent days. Much of the good will between Australians and Americans is based on the shared experiences of World War II.

In March 2002, I visited the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. This exceptional display of the history of WWII in Europe and the Pacific had no mention of the 1942 bombing of Darwin. In February 2013, I attended a lecture at New College in Sarasota, Florida, by a history professor who spoke on "The events that lead to the attack on Pearl Harbor." He made no reference to the bombing of Darwin, and I asked him why. He replied that he was unaware of the event.

This is the case for most Americans. We all know that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, a date that FDR said "will live in infamy." What most Americans do not realize is that 10 weeks after Pearl Harbor, elements of the same Japanese force under the command of Admiral Chuicho Naguma attacked Darwin from four of the same aircraft carriers used at Pearl Harbor: *Akagi*, *Soryu*, *Kaga*, and *Hiryu*.

The British bastion of Singapore fell on Feb. 15, 1942, as the Japanese moved to capture the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) for the oil and rubber supplies needed to fuel their war efforts. Australian losses defending Singapore were staggering, with 1,789 killed, 1,306 wounded and 15,395 captured. This was one of the worst military disasters in Australian history.

At 9:58 a.m. on Feb. 19, 1942, 188 bombers led by the same commander who attacked Hawaii, Mitsuo Fuchida, dropped more, but less massive, bombs on Darwin than they did on Pearl Harbor. Japanese torpedoes, so effective at Pearl Harbor, were not used at Darwin. The rationale for the bombing was to protect the invasion of Timor, planned for the next day, from a Darwin-based counter-attack. Eleven ships were sunk and others were damaged. In less than one hour, at least 230 people were killed and more than 300 were wounded.

The precise number of dead is controversial and

cannot be known because of the ensuing chaos and the flight of civilians to the south. At 11:58 a.m., a second wave of 54 land-based heavy bombers from Ambon obliterated the Darwin RAAF airfield in 20 minutes. The bombing of Darwin was the worst disaster in history on Australian soil. Much of Darwin was destroyed, and the city and nearby defense areas would absorb 62 more attacks until Nov. 12, 1943.

Nearly half of the dead — 112 — were Americans. The latest research indicated that 88 U.S. sailors perished when the destroyer *USS Peary* was dived-bombed and sunk in Darwin Harbor. Eyewitness accounts stated that the *Peary's* forward machine guns continued to fire as the ship slipped below the oily, flaming waters and the burning ship's magazine exploded. Fourteen sailors on the seaplane tender *USS William B. Preston*, one from a Catalina PBY flying boat, and four American soldiers from the 148th US Field Artillery also perished in the bombing. Four U.S. Army Air Corp P-40 Kittyhawk fighter pilots died when they were blown out of the sky as the 33rd Pursuit Squadron rose to meet the vastly superior Japanese force. The U.S. Merchant Service suffered one American and 15 Filipino deaths spread over three ships.

I continued my research visits to Darwin in 2003, '04, '05, and '09. I was in Darwin again on Nov. 17, 2011, when President Obama visited with then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard to announce the U.S.'s new Asia/Pacific policy that would require the prepositioning of relief supplies and, eventually, 2,500 U.S. Marines at an Australian base outside of Darwin.

The president met with a relative of a *USS Peary* crew member and laid a wreath at the Peary War Memorial on the Esplanade in Darwin. This was the first visit of an American President to Darwin and many of the 100,000 residents of this beautiful tropical city lined the parade route to welcome him. The President acknowledged the heroic efforts of the Australian anti-aircraft gunners and rescuers and the American servicemen on that fateful day, 19 February, 1942. The Bombing of Darwin Day is a national day of observance throughout Australia, "Lest we forget."

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