

1942 JAPAN BOMBS DARWIN & SUBMARINES SHOCK SYDNEY

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Japan bombs Darwin

The Japanese bombers — wave after wave in V-shaped formations — darkened the skies above an unsuspecting Darwin. Many residents were already at work or shopping; a few that looked skyward smilingly told one another: 'Thank God the Yank planes are here at last.'

But, within minutes, their smiles turned to terror as the bomb bays opened, dropping the first salvo of bombs which looked to one observer like 'a big raindrop as the sun caught them — a flash and then nothing more'.

Others remember the moment as a scene from a silent movie: the slow descent of the bombs, then one fireball after the other lighting up the horizon as, with deadly accuracy, the bombs found their first targets in the dockside area. The sound of the blasts came at the same time as the first air-raid sirens wailed into life, too late to warn the city.

The time was 9.55 a.m. on February 19, 1942. The Second World War had finally come home to Australia — to be met not with heroic resistance, but with such incompetence, panic, drunken looting and even cowardice that Sir Paul Hasluck, later Governor-General of Australia, could only describe it as 'a day of national shame'.

Armed with wartime powers of censorship, the Curtin Government did its best to cover up the disgraceful debacle in the interests of morale.

On the day after the Japanese raid the Press was officially told that 15 people had been killed and 24 wounded when, in reality, 243 airmen, sailors, soldiers and civilians were dead, and between 300 and 400 injured.

Eight ships were sunk, and 12 badly damaged, while 20 aircraft were shot down or wiped out on the ground, together with the Royal Australian Air Force base and airfield. Many buildings in the city were destroyed, including the post office where 10 staff were killed.

Mr Justice Lowe was hastily appointed a Royal Commissioner to investigate the circumstances connected with the attack. But his report was kept secret for more than 30 years; so, too, were many eyewitness accounts. Only recently have researchers been given access to these and other official documents which enabled them to piece together the events that created Darwin's Day of Shame.

As the Japanese advances in the Pacific brought Darwin within striking distance, the Australian War Cabinet evacuated more than 2000 people, mainly women and children. But more than 3000 civilians still remained in the city, some engaged in essential work, others determined not to leave their homes and their husbands.

On Wednesday, February 18, 1942, Commander Minoru Genda, the man who had played a major role in the Pearl Harbour attack only a few weeks earlier, was in the Timor Sea on board the aircraft carrier *Akagi* debriefing two of his pilots who only hours before had flown over Darwin.

They confirmed that a rich prize awaited the Japanese naval task force of 16 ships, including four aircraft carriers. Not only would they have a chance to wipe out the major port in northern Australia, but also a convoy of four merchant ships and four warships, two American and two Australian, lying in Port Darwin.

Allied air cover over Darwin, the pilots informed their delighted commander, was virtually non-existent.

Genda did not hesitate. Within hours he launched a formidable 188 plane strike force, consisting of 81 level-bombers, 71 dive-bombers and 36 Zero fighters.

Strike force leader Commander Mitsuo Fuchida was told: 'Annihilate the enemy in the Port Darwin area.' In case anything remained, Genda planned to follow up the initial strike with 54 bombers based on land in the Celebes.

At shortly after 9.30 a.m. on February 19 Fuchida's strike force passed over Bathurst Island, 80 kilometres north-north-west of Darwin.

The planes were spotted by Father John McGrath, the priest at the island's Catholic mission, who also doubled as a coast watcher. Father McGrath rushed to his radio and flashed an emergency warning to Darwin. The Darwin coastal radio station acknowledged and, at 9.37 a.m., phoned the message to the duty officer at the city's RAAF operations headquarters.

Yet, amazingly, the Air Force could not decide whether it was, in fact, an attack force or only a flight of American P40 Kittyhawks which were expected at any time. Several previous air raid alarms had proved to be false and the officers were not keen to sound them again until they were sure in their own minds that it was, in fact, a Japanese force — or so they claimed later.

While they hesitated, the Japanese strike force sped unhindered towards its target.

The air raid alarms sounded at the same time as the first bombs exploded. One eyewitness, Merton Woods, penned this dramatic account in a letter only hours after the attack:

The raiders were already dropping their bombs before the alarm finished sounding. I ran to the post office to send a wire that an alarm had started. Just as I had written it bombs started to explode and anti-aircraft guns go off and the whole building shook.

With everyone else in the P.O., I ran down a gully and sheltered in the open. Then a bomb dropped somewhere close and showered us in rubble. I got up and ran a few yards nearer the post office and sheltered under a rocky ledge.

Then another bomb dropped nearly and a piece of rock, about 10 pounds, fell on to my head, raising a bit of a bump...

Then I crawled over and crouched with my back against a low concrete wall, with my back to the post office.

I was there only a few minutes when a bomb dropped about 15 yards away. Stones and dirt showered down all over me. I protected my head as best I could with my hands. Everything went black for a minute or so and I felt I was buried, but could not feel anything on me.

Then as the dust cleared I saw the concrete wall had cleared me. Other chaps who had been lying a yard or so in front of the wall were hit by the flying debris and injured, though I don't think seriously. After this one I again crawled down the gully and sheltered for the rest of the raid against

another stone wall.

From there I had a bird's eye view of the dive bombing attacks on shipping in the harbour. Planes often flew over machine gunning, but, touch wood, nothing came within 20 yards of me.

When the all clear sounded ... I passed the wall against which I was earlier (and) I saw a bomb crater about 20 yards from the wall. The post office was wrecked and they were carrying out the people killed. Pieces of galvanised iron were caught in trees.

I then walked through the town looking for someone I knew. Suddenly there was another terrific explosion from the direction of the waterfront. Flames and smoke shot into the air. ...

I then went to the hospital with a stretcher case. The hospital, too, had been damaged by bombs and machine gun fire.

The reaction to the raids was total panic. A train was hurriedly organised to evacuate women, children and the elderly, but they were pushed aside by able-bodied men who clambered into the cattle trucks.

A detachment of drunk military police sent to restore order at the railway station went wild, firing their guns at random into the air, adding to the confusion and fear. They threatened to kill anyone who even spoke to them.

Then another air raid alarm sent people fleeing from the raid looking for cover. The terrified train crew started the train moving and it continued travelling empty until it reached the end of the line at Birdum, 544 km to the

south, leaving the women and children stranded in Darwin.

Drunken servicemen and civilians roamed the streets of Darwin, smashing windows of shops and homes and looting everything remotely valuable. When police tried to intervene, the military threatened to shoot them.

At the RAAF base, too, pandemonium reigned. The commanding officer, Sturt Griffith, issued an order that his 1100 officers and men should evacuate the base and assemble 'half a mile into the bush'.

As the order filtered through the ranks, it became more and more distorted, until eventually many men believed they were meant to 'go bush' because a Japanese invasion was taking place.

The result was a disgraceful stampede, a case of 'every man for himself' as officers deserted their men and raced off to save their own skins.

One of the few officers who remained behind later told the Royal Commission: 'The men were sheep, absolute sheep. They didn't know where to go and this included officers, non-commissioned officers and aircraftsmen — everybody. There was no distinction between the lot of them... The old (First World War) AIF would blush with shame and they would turn in their graves if they knew what happened at Darwin.'

Commandeering and stealing whatever vehicles they could lay their hands on, hundreds of military personnel made it to Adelaide River, 100 kilometres away.

One reached Melbourne in an amazing 13 days, while others fled as far as

Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane. Four days after the raid, 278 servicemen were still absent without leave.

News of the attack shocked Australia.

In a bid to bolster public confidence, Prime Minister John Curtin brazenly lied to the nation immediately after the raid: 'In this first battle on Australian soil, it will be a source of pride to the public to know that the armed forces and the civilians composed themselves with the gallantry that is traditional in the people of our stock.'

To find the real truth, however, he appointed a Royal Commission, which reported in strict secrecy.

On March 4, 1942, while the commission was sitting in Darwin, Japanese bombers struck again.

Another 57 raids on the city took place in the following 22 months, during which time Broome, in Western Australia, and Townsville, in north Queensland, were also bombed. But never again was there the same shameful panic which will forever sour the memory of Australia's first battle on home ground.

Submarines shock Sydney

Sydney was like a sitting duck — and a juicy one at that — for the three 2-man Japanese midget submarines sent into the harbour to attack Allied shipping on the night of 31 May 1942.

Their commanders had a shrewd idea what to expect, for only the previous morning, shortly before dawn, a small scouting plane had carefully reconnoitred the harbour after taking off from one of the ‘mother’ submarines which had brought the midgets to within striking range of Australia’s largest city.

Years later, the pilot, Susumo Ito, told how his unmarked plane had been able to fly up the harbour at a height of 180 metres, allowing his observer to sketch the position of the anti-submarine boom and its entrance.

After observing the various warships and passing over Sydney Harbour bridge at a mere 137 metres, Ito strayed towards Mascot Airport — which turned on the landing lights to guide him in. After ten minutes over the city he headed back to the waiting submarines with a detailed report.

As the midgets sped away from the submarines the following night, they were guided to their destination by lights shining brightly at the Heads, the entrance to Sydney Harbour, and once inside, by brilliant floodlights on Garden Island.

The anti-submarine loops had presented no problem either — the outer ones were out of order, and the inner ones so unreliable that no one any longer paid attention to their occasional warnings.

Although the censored newspapers reported next day that ‘they found our defences prepared’, quite the opposite had been the case.

Nineteen people died when the *Kattabul*, a harbour ferry which had been converted to sleeping quarters for naval ratings, was hit by a torpedo apparently aimed at the United States cruiser *Chicago* moored nearby.

Only two of the three midgets were recovered. One had been destroyed by depth charges, the other had become tangled in the anti-submarine boom.

From the wreckage one midget submarine was constructed and put to work for the Allied cause — touring Australia to raise money for war charities. Now preserved at the Australian War Museum in Canberra, it remains a constant reminder of just how vulnerable Australia once was.