

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, good morning. We gather today to remember and commemorate those Australians and American citizens who were killed, injured or otherwise suffered during the bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942.

But first a little background information.

During the Great War of 1914-18; Japan was a fully fledged partner of the Allies, in fact the Japanese battle cruiser *Ibuki* was in the fleet that sailed from Albany for Egypt in October 1914. However when the spoils of the victors were being divided Japan felt that it was unfairly treated, and the relationship started to unravel.

Despite the great depression that followed the first world war most nations experienced population growth. In Japan's case it found that it did not have the natural resources to sustain its people and sought to expand. The period after World War I brought about increasing stress on the Japanese society. Leftists sought universal suffrage and greater rights for workers. Increasing textile production from Chinese mills was adversely affecting Japanese production. The Great Depression brought about a large slowdown in exports. All of this contributed to militant nationalism, culminating in the rise to power of a militarist fascist faction. In 1931, the Mukden Incident helped spark the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The Chinese were defeated and Japan created a new puppet state. Many historians cite 1931 as the beginning of the

war. From 1931 to 1937, China and Japan continued to skirmish in small, localized engagements, so-called "incidents".

Britain and America became concerned at Japan's aggressive aspirations and sought to contain them by applying restraints, some of which were sufficiently harsh that Japan considered itself in an untenable situation.

The war in the Pacific was the result of a decades-long Japanese imperialist policy to expand its influence politically and militarily in order to secure access to raw material reserves, food, and labor. As Japan saw it, its only course was to seize neighbouring resource rich nations notwithstanding that this would inevitably lead to war with Britain and America. With this in mind it decided to get in first; it launched pre-emptive strikes at various British and American possessions, the major target being Pearl Harbour in America's Pacific Ocean state of Hawaii, other targets being Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore..

Japan's plan at that stage was to bring the USA to the negotiation table by the suddenness, aggressiveness and success of its early actions. It was an acknowledged gamble for Japan, which realised that should the war become prolonged, America's industrial might would prevail.

Japan's plans were successful beyond their expectations and extended its possessions far into the Pacific. Against this the American aircraft carriers had

not been at Pearl Harbour and were intact, and Americans were reacting more quickly and positively than envisaged.

Japan's strategic thinking then turned to the possibility of America's mounting a counter-attack. Distance precluded such a launch from America itself and a suitable base would be needed. In the wide Pacific there was but one suitable base – Australia, which made it an obvious Japanese target.

The Japanese Navy had the capacity to invade Australia and drew up plans for doing so. Japan's army on the other hand held that the navy's task was but to mount the invasion; after that it became the army's responsibility to capture the country. Having regard to the size of the Australian continent it held that it did not have enough troops to undertake even selected operations and that the merchant navy was at its limits and would be unable to supply them.

The Japanese military reached a compromise. It was decided that the islands north and east of Australia would be captured thus isolating Australia. However, in the background Japan's navy licked its wounds, intent on returning to its arguments should further progress be achieved with the same speed and success as had been accomplished until then.

Australia of course knew nothing of the happenings in Japan. What it did know was that Australia was an essential base for America and the major strategic target. It realised that it was virtually defenceless; its volunteer

sailors, soldiers and airmen were overseas and those who were left were untrained and lacking equipment. (Even two years nine months after the outbreak of war there were not enough rifles to go around). The air force was in an even worse state. The Labor ministry was not prepared to introduce conscription for overseas service nor to change to a war footing the everyday lives of unions and the population generally.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> February 1942 Australia awoke to an article in the morning papers suggesting that Japan may not try to invade Australia. Speaking in Sydney on the 18<sup>th</sup> February, The Lieutenant Governor-General of the Netherland East Indies said that Japan would probably blockade Australia, attack Darwin and raid Australian cities. They would try to cut communications and stop Australia being used as a base. He continued on to say that all that the Japanese need to complete their own economic system is contained in the NEI. They do not need anything from Australia.

However what was happening on the fighting front as it came closer to Australia increased the feelings of uncertainty in the wider Australian population.

Singapore and Australia's 8th Division there had capitulated.

Elements of the 7th Division had been lost in Java when the Dutch surrendered.

Major ships had been lost in battle and our few Wirraways were no match for Japan's Zeros.

The one battalion garrisons on Ambon, Timor and Rabaul were swarmed over even though they might have been saved if appropriately reinforced.

### **And then Darwin was bombed!**

Darwin was then a small town with a civilian population of less than 2,000. Its position in the north of Australia made it an important military base from which to mount campaigns against the Japanese advance. It was the base for the 7th Military District of Australia. At the time of the bombing, the 23rd Australian Infantry Brigade and two Australian infantry anti-aircraft batteries were stationed at Darwin. The RAAF was based 8km south of Darwin while the RAN was based in Darwin.

Darwin was first bombed at 9.58am on 19 February 1942. On that day, 242 [Japanese](#) aircraft, in two separate raids, attacked the town, ships in [Darwin's](#) harbour and the town's two airfields in an attempt to prevent the [Allies](#) from using them as bases to contest the [invasion of Timor](#) and [Java](#).

The attack by Japanese aircraft was launched from four carriers stationed near the island of Timor about 500km northwest of Darwin. The commander who led the attack on Pearl Harbour, was also in charge of the bombing of Darwin. During the first attack the prime target was the harbour that contained the RAN base and floating dock. There were 35 Allied ships in the harbour at this time. Eight ships were sunk and two beached but later re-floated. Casualties during the half hour air raid included:

- US destroyer, Peary, sunk. 80 lives lost.
- US transport, Meig, sunk. 2 lives lost.

- Australian ship, Neptunia hit by explosives. Captain and 45 crew killed.
- Hospital ship, Manunda hit but survived. Four killed including a nurse.
- Pier blown up but 70 waterside workers survived. Twenty two workers died as they swam through burning oil when trying to make their way ashore.
- Nine people were killed when the post office blew up.
- Darwin hospital bombed but no casualties.
- Two died when Government House was bombed.

The second attack on Darwin, by 45 bombers, took place about two hours later. This attack was launched from land in the Celebes and Ambon. The prime target in this case was the airfield. On this occasion seven men were killed.

During these first two attacks 243 people were killed, and between 300 and 400 were wounded. Twenty military aircraft were destroyed, military and civil facilities in Darwin were destroyed and 8 ships were sunk. The Japanese lost between 5 and 10 aircraft.

The Prime Minister, Mr Curtin, announced late on that evening that “The Government regards these attacks as most grave and makes it quite clear that a severe blow has been struck in this first battle on Australian soil.” He went on to say “it will be a source of pride to the public to know that the armed

forces and civilians conducted themselves with the gallantry that was traditional in people of British stock.”

The Victorian Premier, Mr Dunstan said that “we could no longer have doubts regarding the enemy’s intentions nor his ability to bomb this country. The feelings of splendid isolation no longer remained. Our mettle was about to be tested, but I am confident none of us will be found wanting.”

In the nations’s newspapers on 23 February 1942 the Prime Minister signed an advertisement – which read.

“DARWIN HAS BEEN BOMBED – BUT NOT CONQUERED

WE MUST FACE WITH FORTITUDE THE FIRST ONSET AND REMEMBER THAT WHATEVER THE FUTURE HOLDS IN STORE FOR US WE ARE AUSTRALIANS AND WILL FIGHT GRIMLY AND VICTORIOUSLY.

LET US EACH VOW THAT THIS BLOW AT DARWIN AND THE LIVES THAT IT HAS INVOLVED, AND THE SUFFERING IT HAS OCCASIONED, SHALL GIRD OUR LOINS AND STEEL OUR NERVE.

WE, TOO, IN EVERY OTHER AUSTRALIAN CITY CAN FACE THESE ASSAULTS WITH THE GALLANTRY THAT IS TRADITIONAL IN THE PEOPLE OF OUR STOCK.”

JOHN CURTIN, PRIME MINISTER

Between 19 February 1942 and 12 November 1943 Darwin was bombed 64 times. Other towns in northern Australia were also bombed including Broome, Port Hedland, Townsville, Cairns and Exmouth.

Most Australians at that time thought this was the beginning of a planned invasion of Australia and acted in response to that belief, as did the Government.

After the defeat of the Japanese and Victory in the Pacific on 15 August 1945, it was discovered that the Japanese never intended to invade Australia. Instead, they had planned to invade Timor, but first needed to make sure the Allies could not use Darwin as a base for a counter-attack.

We will continue to remember and commemorate them. Those Australian and American citizens who were killed, injured or otherwise suffered during the bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942.