

**TRANSCRIPT OF KEY NOTE ADDRESS AT THE MELBOURNE SHRINE OF
REMEMBRANCE FOR THE COMMEMORATION OF THE BOMBING OF DARWIN
- FEBRUARY 19, 2019**

by

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DARWIN – WHY THE SILENCE?

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, good morning. What an absolute honour it is for me to be standing in front of you on the forecourt of Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance on this important day, the Commemoration of the Bombing of Darwin.

My first experience of the Shrine was as a young girl with my father Jock Connor, and siblings. My father would take us on a train ride – a red rattler – from our home in Preston into ‘town’, now known as Melbourne’s CBD. After a visit to St Francis’ Catholic Church, lunch of Four’n’Twenty pies and doughnuts on the bank of the Yarra, we’d walk here - to the Shrine.

My early memories of this sacred place are rolling down the grassy hills and racing up and down the stairs. Inside, my father read and re-read the names of men and women who had died fighting for their country.

On walking through the colonnaded porticos, my child’s mind didn’t quite understand the significance of the building I was entering, but what I did know was that this was somewhere special requiring respect, reverence and inside voices. I knew this represented an occurrence that warranted quiet reflection.

My father was sombre after these visits, you see he had been a gunner and signalman and for nearly two years, served in Darwin with the 8th Division's 2/14th Australian Field Regiment, the sole major combat unit of the 8th Division remaining on the Australia Order of Battle. Following the loss of the 23rd Infantry Brigade (2/21st on Ambon; 2/40th on Timor and 2/22nd at Rabaul in January 1942 and the surrender of the 8th Division Troops in Singapore on 16th February, 1942, the commanding officers decided the 8th Division's colour patch would have a perpendicular 'break' to signify the Broken Eighth.

My first realisation of Darwin's history was in 2012, when I visited the town for the 70th Commemoration of the Bombing. When the airport's automatic doors opened, I felt assaulted by the heat and humidity. My first thoughts were of my father a northern Englishman - from Lancashire. How did he cope in the searing temperatures, without AC, mosquito repellent or sun-block?

Like many Australians – especially ones from down south - I hadn't known what transpired during the nearly 18 months of attacks on the then little known frontier town. I hadn't known about Japan's systematic bombing of Darwin around 65 times and the north of Australia over 100 times. I thought Darwin had been bombed just once.

I knew more about Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour in America, than I did of the attacks on my own country.

As I became aware of the facts my thoughts kept landing in the same place. "Why don't I know about this?" Why don't all Australians know about this?

My appetite was well and truly whet. I had to know more. I had to return to learn about that town prior to and during that time.

The following year I travelled north for the 71st commemoration, and allocated time for research. I spent a couple of those days at the NT Archival Centre where I learned about the town.

I learned that Darwin had been a thriving colourful place prior to the influx of soldiers. For those who weren't afraid of hard work and had a modicum of entrepreneurship, Darwin was the place where you could build a life. It was a multi-cultural town with the Larrakia, Japanese, Chinese, Malay, Philippinos and Europeans living peacefully together. Children fell asleep to an orchestra of sounds: Aboriginals singing and clacking their bilma, frogs croaking and mopokes hooting. The *Star Picture Theatre* was the place to be, with Western films on Wednesday nights for Aboriginals, and on Saturday nights Anglos watched the latest movies. Tickets cost two and six – 25 cents in new money.

I also learned about another chapter in Darwin's history that has been kept silent.

When women and children were evacuated in December 1941, they were shipped down south without any order or thought. Women who had families or contacts on the east coast could have found themselves on a ship scheduled to sail down the west coast. And visa versa . Families were allowed to take one suitcase between them. In some circumstances, women couldn't cope when they arrived at their destination and with no other choice, put their children into orphanages, sometimes having to separate siblings. Parenting-pensions

weren't available in those days. When the mother ran out of money, the family became homeless, destitute. Some children stayed in the orphanages until they came of age and had to leave. Families were permanently broken as many didn't see their mothers or separated siblings again.

Through ongoing research, I learned that letters coming out of Darwin were censored and recipients often received an envelope with shredded paper when they were expecting news from their loved ones. Before the letters left Darwin, Censors took to them with razor blades if there was anything they felt shouldn't be written.

I learned that soldiers in Darwin were under-resourced and issued with a minimum number of guns and ammunition left over from the First World War, marked not to be used in the tropics. As soldiers were not adequately resourced, and in some cases issued with sharpened star pickets to fight an air-borne enemy, veterans told me they felt ashamed as they were not able to protect their country. New artillery had been sent overseas with soldiers fighting the Germans for England and the Japanese for America.

I learned that soldiers feared a full moon and on these nights many slept in trenches.

I learned that Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill and America's General Macarthur ignored Australia's Prime Minister John Curtin's pleas for reinforcements. Churchill told Curtin he was panicking, for no good reason.

I learned:

- More bombs fell on Darwin than on Pearl Harbour

- More ships were sunk in Darwin than in Pearl Harbour
- When it happened, the raid on Darwin stood with that on Coventry England, as one of the biggest and deadliest air attacks yet seen in WWII
- Its impact on the Australian people was small because the government would not trust them with the truth

The Awkward Truth, Peter Grose

The bombings took the people of Darwin by surprise. Four Japanese fighter ships dropped anchor two hundred and thirty-six miles off the coast. Zeros, Vals and Kates hovered over the flight deck, before taking off. They gathered into formations and headed for their targets. They flew east and west turning around then attacking from the south.

After my research in Darwin my next stop was the War Memorial in Canberra. Before heading to the library which is at the back of the building, I visited the Second World War exhibition hall; Darwin was all but absent. I had to ask an attendant if there was an exhibit on the bombing of Darwin. I had walked around the Second World War section a couple of times and couldn't see anything about the events that took place on Australian shores. The young attendant said for me to follow him. We walked past the Singapore exhibit, Malaya exhibit, Kokoda Track exhibit. He veered suddenly down a dark passage between high glass cabinets. At the end were two smaller displays; one with an old television showing black and white footage of John Curtin standing on the steps of an impressive looking building. One hand was punching the palm of the other while he told the Australian people soldiers in Darwin were fighting the Japanese and would not give up until the war was

won. Next to that, general war memorabilia; a tin hat, a ragged flag, a headline of a local newspaper that read *Diggers show Japs who's boss.*

AND THAT WAS IT. The display about the Bombing of Darwin had been tucked away in a dark corner.

Library staff had allocated files on the 2/14th Australian Field Regiment, Jock's regiment. They were tedious, mostly about the day to day journal entries of duties and rosters; how a good soldier keeps his uniform clean, how cleanliness is important in the cookhouse. But one diary entry stood out.

Dated the 19th February 1942, three lines had been sliced out. It looked as if someone had taken to it with a razor blade. I held the page up and looked straight through it to the bricks in the wall in front of me. Why would someone do such a thing? The first time Australia's main land was bombed and the diary entry had been cut out. The bombing was to become a secret. It was cut out of the records. The tone of silence had been set and to-day we live with that legacy.

When I asked the library staff why, who, when did such a thing happen, they looked shocked. They had no idea that the 19th February 1942 diary entry for the 2/14th Australian Field Regiment has been censored. Staff from the library helped with photocopying of files I needed. When I returned to Melbourne and checked the photocopies, I couldn't find the one with the slashed out diary date.

My visit to the War Memorial brought up more questions than answers.

In finishing, I'd like to leave with a couple of take-home thoughts. Why is there such silence around Darwin? And what can we all do to ensure this important and sad chapter in our story lives on?

NOT TO GLORIFY WAR. I WANT TO BE VERY CLEAR ABOUT THAT.

But to respect and have gratitude for people who had no control over the adversity they faced, but who maintained a belief that what they did was right, was for the better and would contribute to a more peaceful world. It is about remembering with gratitude those who suffered unimaginable horrors that changed them forever and for those who died defending our country.

Thank you....