

Darwin Defenders Speech, 19 February 2020

I arrived in Australia in the middle of the night. The Jumbo jet carrying my wife and myself, Irish immigrants, to a new life as high school teachers with the Department of Education, New South Wales, made its first landing in Australia in Darwin on 12 January 1972 at roughly 2 am in the morning. In those days flights from London lasted for 32 hours and called in all over the Middle East and Asia before reaching Australia. At Darwin we saw only a tired looking Customs Officer, had time to read and think about a notice telling us to obey strict dress standards at Australian airports, and then off to Sydney.

Despite travelling all over Australia, and overseas, in later years in jobs I had with the Australian War Memorial and then the Department of Veterans' Affairs, somehow this never brought me to Darwin. I had to write about the place especially covering that dramatic period of World War 2 when Darwin and the Northern Territory became Australia's front line. I authored a short booklet - *Australia Under Attack ... Darwin and the Northern Territory, 1942-1945* - a DVA publication. Research took me to the Australian War Memorial looking for suitable images. There I saw mighty bulldozers building the Alice Springs-Darwin highway; a moving photo of a family of nine evacuated Darwin refugees taken before the father was killed on the wharf during the 19 February 1942 big air raid; the shadowy shape of a Japanese bomber snapped from an attacking Australian fighter during another raid in June 1943; and a navy firefighting team, with hose, behind an asbestos shield with the huge flames of an oil tank on fire rising before them. One sad image showed the graves, marked by little white crosses, of civilians killed in that first big raid, each little cross with its own name in black letters. What intrigued me about this photo was the fact that the men who buried these casualties had erected their

own, small, information cross telling us that these burials had been made by the 12th Mobile Laundry Unit of the Australian Army. The job of gravedigger was something they didn't bargain for when they arrived in Darwin in early 1942 to keep their military comrades in clean clothes.

But the image which most caught my attention was not a black and white photograph but a colour painting. It was by official Australian war artist, Roy Hodgkinson, appointed to this position on 16 February 1942, just days before that devastating air raid. Roy was there on 19 February 1942 when, at 9.58 am, twenty-seven Japanese bombers with accompanying fighter aircraft began their attack. At some point he must have been close to and observing two young Darwin defenders, Gunners Tommy Hill and Neil Cook who were manning an anti-aircraft light machine gun position. Roy's painting, 'Lewis gun attached to the 14th Australian Anti-Aircraft Battery, Darwin, 1942', shows one of the gunners firing up at an enemy aircraft. Spent shells cases fall away and his mate stands ready with another magazine of bullets. It is a moment of intense action and movement; we sense the noise of explosions; the din of low flying aircraft and the vibration and stutter of the machine gun. Beyond Tommy and Neil, out and away from their circular sand-bagged position, we see huge columns of billowing, black smoke ascending into the sky from burning buildings and other installations. It's just like those awful dark, plumes of smoke we have become used to in this season of Australian bushfires.

Looking at this painting now I am amazed to realise that I actually met one of these gunners. Not Tommy or Neil, as shown in Hodgkinson's painting, but another, at that time young man, also defending Darwin in this very same unit, the 14th Australian Anti-Aircraft Battery. Back in 1992 I was part of a team of four, of which our MC this morning Tim Gurry was one, researching the defence of Australia in the year 1942 aimed at producing a teaching kit on that

subject. As a researcher I uncovered, don't ask me how, the fact that on that day at Darwin two of these anti-aircraft gunners had been awarded a Military Medal, an award given for what was called 'Bravery in the Field', the field of battle. These two medals were the first to Australian servicemen for the defence of Australian soil in war. That's quite something when you realise that many thousands of Australians, men and women, were awarded Military Medals in World War One and World War Two. Even better, one of these two medal awardees was alive and living in the NSW in the town of Taree, three and a half hours north of Sydney by road. We sped up there to meet and interview Fred Wombey, who would have then have been in his early 70s. We saw the medal and got some footage of Fred for a film we were making for the education kit.

The other Military Medal awarded on 19 February 1942 went to Gunner Wilbur Thomas Hudson. I want to acknowledge him briefly here because for the rest of this presentation I'm going to concentrate on Fred Wombey for personal reasons that will become obvious. 'Darky' Hudson, as he was nicknamed, was a shy, quiet 21-year-old lad from Merrylands, near Sydney, New South Wales. Asked why he had been awarded the medal Darky replied:

Well, I just sort of brought down a Jap plane with my gun.

How do I know this sort of personal detail? From the *Australian Women's Weekly*, a magazine which virtually everyone in this country has at least heard off, founded in 1933 and still going strong. Indeed, according to Wikipedia, the *Weekly* in 2019 again became Australia's most read magazine having knocked *Better Homes and Gardens* off that perch. Well, back in October 1942, shortly after the Military Medals to Wombey and Hudson were announced officially, the *Weekly* ran a long article about them making them two of the best-known young servicemen in Australia at the time. Everyone read the *Weekly*, including

servicemen and women as it featured a well-known column called ‘Letters from Our Boys’.

Reading this article again, over a quarter of century after I first read it for the ‘Defence of Australia’ kit, I realised something about Fred Wombey. He was born not far from where I live in Canberra, at Tallong, a little dot on the map near Goulburn. Driving the road to Sydney, which I’ve done dozens of times, I would have passed close to where young Fred spent his childhood and attended Tallong Public School on Bumballa Street, claimed to be the oldest surviving, single-teacher schoolhouse in Australia, built in 1865. From there Fred went to Goulburn High School and we’ll hear shortly about how kids in his old schools reacted to his award in far- away Darwin in February 1942 ... all courtesy of the *Women’s Weekly* reporter who clearly went to Tallong and Goulburn to research their piece in October 1942.

The *Weekly* is not what you’d call a ‘military’ source for this Darwin story. But what it does, and does superbly, is place these two young Darwin defenders squarely within their circle of family, friends and acquaintances. It turns them from the rather one-dimensional soldiers, written up in the official and distant language of the descriptions of their actions for the medals, the citations, into real people. They come from somewhere; they are part of a small local, rural society; and they have a mum, dad, sisters, brothers, and girlfriends with names like Betty, Doreen, Don and Joan. The *Weekly* article, almost certainly the longest and most detailed piece in print ever written about these two otherwise obscure individuals, makes them human beings, not just ‘heroes’. And behind it all we sense that long and tiresome journey they made to Darwin, across this huge continent in slow moving trucks and trains, to an encounter in the early morning of 19 February 1942 with the might of the bombers and fighters of the

Imperial Japanese Navy ... noise, dust, explosions, fire, smoke and death. They were a long, long way from Tallong and Merrylands.

The Wombey family, or more exactly Fred Wombey's dad, tells how the news of Fred's actions in Darwin came to the family home ... as they sat around the table for dinner:

We always have the news on (on the radio) said Mr Wombey but sometimes it's hard to hear it for the noise. I tell the children nobody would ever know they had three brothers fighting, the way they don't listen to the war news. I heard something about the Military Medal for bravery in Australia and I held up my fork for silence. Even then I only caught the words Lance-Bombadier F R ... then I couldn't hear the surname – but I heard Tallong. When about a quarter of an hour later Arthur Johnson from the store in town ... came out, and then other neighbours, I knew it was right.

Here's the chatter of the dinner table from the other three Wombey children, Fred's younger brothers and sister, and dad as he strains to make out what's being said on the crackling radio, trying to get silence. Then the neighbours hurry in with the exciting news and share in the family's amazement.

And I was excited last year when on a huge cruise ship with my wife I entered Darwin harbour and tied up at the wharf. Next afternoon we embarked on a harbour cruise and, as we sped away from the ship and around the point at Stokes Hill, I realised I was looking up at the oil tanks where on 19 February 1942 Fred Wombey stood in his anti-aircraft machine gun position. He was defending that precious oil and a direct hit from a Japanese shell or bomb would have incinerated him and all his mates. Roy Hodgkinson's painting and that

Women's Weekly article came alive for me and I realised I knew something, however small, about the defence of Darwin on 19 February 1942.