

80th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BOMBING OF DARWIN KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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THE BOMBING OF DARWIN 19 FEBRUARY 1942 – 80 YEARS ON AND LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Veterans, Ladies & Gentlemen and most importantly the young people with us today.

Why do we commemorate such events as the bombing of Darwin 80 years ago, and the other attacks on cities and towns around northern Australia?

It was to allow the veterans of those events to gather and remember their colleagues who unfortunately died. And it was so that we could also acknowledge the sacrifice of the veterans and other Australians who participated and contributed to the secure and stable future we enjoy in Australia.

Whilst these two reasons are still valid, more-so today it is about marking the significance of such events on Australia's history and growth, and to learn from history so that we may continue to grow and not repeat mistakes of the past – so that we may develop a robustness and resilience as we live in this more inter-connected world with its challenges of population growth, environment and resource sharing.

Today particularly is hosted by the Darwin Defenders Association and marks the bombing of Darwin in February 1942. It is a long time ago, 80 years to the day, but as we meet today I wish to acknowledge our President Mr Alan Day, 100 years old last Saturday, who has been a stalwart of commemorating this occasion over so many years.

The attacks on Darwin on 19 February started a series of over 60 such attacks from 1942 to 1944. Just south of Darwin is the Adelaide River War Cemetery where 432 WW2 servicemen and women's graves lie. Alongside, is the civilian cemetery where members from the local community who died also lie. Adelaide River also commemorates the military, civilian and indigenous Australians who lost their lives across northern Australia but whose bodies were never found.

Because as well as Darwin, there were 13 other towns across northern Australia also attacked – Exmouth Gulf in the west, Onslow, Port Hedland, Broome, Derby, Drysdale, Wyndham, Port Paterson, Katherine, Millingimbi, Horn Island, Mossman and even around to Townsville on the east coast.

Australia was embarrassed by these attacks. Defensive installations planned as early as 1925 had not been installed, and the defence forces in Darwin at that time were treated as a second eleven when it came to support and resources in those early years of the war.

Following the initial attack there was a media blackout by Government. Numbers of dead and injured were not made available, and the Government did not keep Australians informed. They were shocked, embarrassed and we were vulnerable.

When I was at school many years ago I did Australian and Western Australian history. The attacks on Darwin and the other towns in the north of Australia were never mentioned. There was no commemoration as there is today; they remained a Government "secret" for many years.

However, thankfully there were some who knew that such significant events as occurred across our north had to be exposed and lessons learned from our failings. They began to discuss and analyse, and most importantly look at how Australia in the future could be better prepared and could grow from the lessons of this recent history.

Our population was too small. With most of the defence forces engaged in Papua New Guinea and the islands to the north and in the Pacific, we simply did not have sufficient people resources at that time to provide credible defence across our north.

There were other lessons such as building defence facilities across northern Australia so as to be able to activate such facilities in times of need. This has become even more important as we have grown and become dependent economically on the export potential of the commodities we mine across the north of our country.

However, it was the need to build our population base that was probably the most important conclusion.

We did learn, and our post WW2 immigration policies saw Australia actively seek migrants to build our population, to give us a robust workforce, and allow us to populate more sparse regions around our country.

For those of you at school, 43 percent of you have a parent who was not born in Australia. 26 percent of you at school today were not borne in Australia. That is, one quarter of you are recent immigrants and I hope proudly so.

Those initial immigrations were from Europe, and then more recently many Asian countries, and many of you here today will have great grandparents, and grandparents who came to Australia in the immediate post war era. That started Australia's active and positive immigration policies. We are now a multi-cultural country, and much of the reason and thinking came from those events in northern Australia in WW2.

And that is why it is important we commemorate and learn from our history. What impact did WW1, WW2, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have on the Australia we have today. How did they influence our growth and values? And it should not just be war and conflicts.

Marking key events in our history, taking the time to stop and remember, and ensuring they are commemorated into the future, reminds us of our history, our development, and how we have become the country we are.

And today, as we gather in the new environment of the global pandemic of COVID 19, we should begin to learn from these recent experiences and prepare better for such events in the future should they happen again. We as individuals, as a country, and as part of a global community need to learn, build and prepare, to make a better place for all.

I return to the events commencing on 19 February 1942 in Darwin. We honour those who served and those who lost their lives in the attacks across the north of Australia.

We were shocked, we had failed to appreciate our vulnerabilities, but we did eventually learn and began applying those learnings to build a better and stronger Australia.

I hope you will also expand those learnings to other conflicts and events that have impacted Australia in the past and even most recently. And ask, how did those events grow the Australia we have today, and how can we continue to build a better Australia for the future.

We are here commemorating; we are here learning.

I thank you all for coming together with the Darwin Defenders today to commemorate the attacks on Australia from 1942 to 1944. These were significant events and it is important we as Australians never forget how we changed after such events.