

Remembering Darwin and ...

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On a warm Thursday morning 79 years ago, on 19 February 1942, two forces of Japanese bombers swept over the Arafura Sea to drop bombs on Darwin...When Australians remember the bombing of Darwin – which they should – as a shocking and potentially portentous event in Australia's history, they might also consider the sufferings of the people of Timor, and Australia's part in it.

The attacks left the town, its port and airfield smoking ruins. About 250 people died, the largest single group 88 American sailors aboard the USS *Peary*, dive-bombed in the harbour. About forty of the dead were Australian civilians, including wharfies, telegraph girls in the bombed Post Office, and Daisy Martin, an Indigenous maid at Government House.

The raid caused consternation as well as destruction. Darwin's defenders were unprepared. Though army gunners defended the airstrip and American pilots gamely took off to confront much larger Japanese forces, confusion and panic consumed the defenders. While the legendary 'Darwin panic' is mostly exaggerated, leaderless servicemen fled into the bush and some looted the still burning town.

Darwin's bombing created other myths – that news of it was withheld from the rest of Australia; that the death toll reached a thousand (with bodies dumped in the mangroves to feed the crocs to conceal the true cost); that the attacks heralded a planned Japanese invasion.

Dramatic and shocking though it was – Australians read of the bombing the next morning, wondering whether their cities would be next – the bombing of Darwin did not foreshadow a Japanese invasion. Even as the bombs fell Japanese commanders in Tokyo were debating where they should go next, and they decided not to invade Australia: the bombing of Darwin had nothing to do with Japan's plans for further conquest.

Why did the Japanese bomb Darwin, then? Simply because they had already conquered much of south-east Asia and especially the Netherlands East Indies: destroying the nearest major Allied base made sense if they were to hold on to their conquests.

Even so, the first half of 1942 remains the greatest crisis in Australia's history as a nation. For a time, it seemed that Australia would face invasion, and it certainly endured attacks – another 62 on Darwin, growing lighter until in November 1943 they ended. By then it was clear that Australia was safe and that the Japanese would be defeated. No one knew when or how, or at what cost, but eventual Allied victory was certain.

But Australia was not the only place to fear Japanese attack and invasion in 1942, though many Australians now only think of the Pacific war in terms of the Japanese threat. For many, encouraged by a succession of parochial populist histories, the only battle many Australians recognise is Kokoda; perhaps Singapore – and that they blame on the British.

The bombing of Darwin represented only the furthest reach of Japanese aggression, and with a few hundred dead almost the least costly of the defeats it inflicted in the months of its

conquest of south-east Asia. Australians interested in the war's effects on their neighbours would do well to consider other events in February 1942.

The very next day after the first bombing raids on Darwin, Japanese invasion forces landed in what was then Dutch Timor, and at Dili, in the supposedly neutral Portuguese colony of East Timor. (Why had they breached Portuguese neutrality? Because an Australian force had already entered the neutral colony: Australia brought the war down on its people.)

The Japanese conquest of the island of Timor became a microcosm of Japan's wartime rule. Timor was necessary to hold as part of the defensive perimeter of Japan's new empire, and its military rulers treated the Timorese ruthlessly in securing it.

Australian 'independent companies' waged a guerrilla war against Timor's Japanese occupiers for a year from February 1942. Numbering no more than a thousand men, they tied down an entire Japanese division until it became clear that they could no longer hold out in Timor's hills and they were withdrawn. The Timorese who aided them were left behind. About 150 Australians died in Timor. But East Timor's civilian dead numbered a thousand times the number of Australians killed in Darwin.

Over the next two years, over 40,000 people – all civilians – died in East Timor alone. To put that figure in context, 40,000 Australians died in the *entire Second World War*, all but a hundred or so of them uniformed personnel – the civilians included the dead of Darwin and merchant sailors torpedoed off Australia's coast.

When Australians remember the bombing of Darwin – which they should – as a shocking and potentially portentous event in Australia's history, they might also consider the sufferings of the people of Timor, and Australia's part in it.

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He spent long years working with the Australian War Memorial as Principal Historian and at the National Museum of Australia as inaugural head of its Research Centre before commencing at UNSW Canberra in 2013 as Research Professor.