

## That place takes a hiding: Life in Fortress Darwin, 1942–1943

Bessie Mikelsons

Just before 10 am on Thursday 19 February 1942, Japanese aircraft conducted a devastating bombing raid on Darwin.<sup>1</sup> The town and shipping in the harbour were laid to waste by 188 Japanese aircraft launched from four aircraft carriers in the Timor Sea.<sup>2</sup> Hours later, a second attack occurred, with 54 Japanese aircraft from airfields in Celebes and Ambon targeting the RAAF aerodrome.<sup>3</sup> These were the first Japanese raids carried out on the Australian mainland. With some 250 killed and major damage done to Darwin, they were also the most destructive.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, 19 February has become the focal point of remembering Darwin's experience of Japanese attacks and features prominently in Australian commemorations of the Second World War. Most literature on the bombing of Darwin focuses heavily on 19 February, largely at the expense of examining the whole period during which Darwin was under attack.<sup>5</sup> This paper will take a different approach, drawing on private records to examine first-hand experiences of the entire period of Japanese raids on Darwin, which lasted until November 1943.

The Australian War Memorial holds hundreds of private records detailing the experience of living through Japanese raids on Darwin. These documents — primarily letters and diaries — demonstrate that 19 February was the first chapter of a story of raids, anxiety, and endurance that spanned almost two years. Personal records provide access into aspects of military life that are often overlooked when examining the experiences of those on the ground in theatres of war. Such examinations tend to focus on what it was like to endure combat, while ignoring what life was like for servicepeople between times of action and danger.

There are, however, some limitations to relying on private records to understand life in Fortress Darwin, as it was known during this period. The available private records are

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Donovan, *Defending the Northern Gateway* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1989), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Dennis et al., “Darwin, Bombing of”, in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 2009): <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195517842.001.0001/acref-9780195517842>, accessed 12 March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Lockwood, *Australia Under Attack* (Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2013), 120.

<sup>4</sup> G. Hermon Gill, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Two – Navy, vol. I: Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957), 595; and Peter Stanley, “The myths of the Darwin raids”, *Wartime*, 17 (2002), 39.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Tom Lewis and Peter Ingman, *Carrier Attack Darwin 1942* (Kent Town, South Australia: Avonmore Books, 2013); and Lockwood, *Australia Under Attack*.

predominantly written by men serving in the armed forces. This lack of diversity in source material has its drawbacks, but it is to a degree representative of those in Darwin at the time. There were few civilians in the Darwin area and even fewer women. While army nurses were present, several private records note that women — whether military or civilian — were a rare sight.<sup>6</sup> Also silent among the private records examined for this paper are the voices of Indigenous people and Darwin’s Asian population. The scope of this project is limited by the contents of private records held at the Memorial, but there is certainly room for wider study regarding the experiences of civilians, women, Indigenous people, and Asian residents. Despite these limitations, such records are valuable in allowing insight into the individual experiences of some of those in Darwin between 19 February 1942 and 12 November 1943.

Darwin’s defences were not prepared for a Japanese air attack of the scale launched on 19 February 1942. The defence of the town was centred on protecting against naval attack, not air attack.<sup>7</sup> Darwin did not have sufficient fighter aircraft to defend itself against a Japanese air assault.<sup>8</sup> As Warrant Officer Class I Keith Martin of the 2/14th Field Regiment put it, “We were sitting ducks and the Jap liked it that way”.<sup>9</sup>

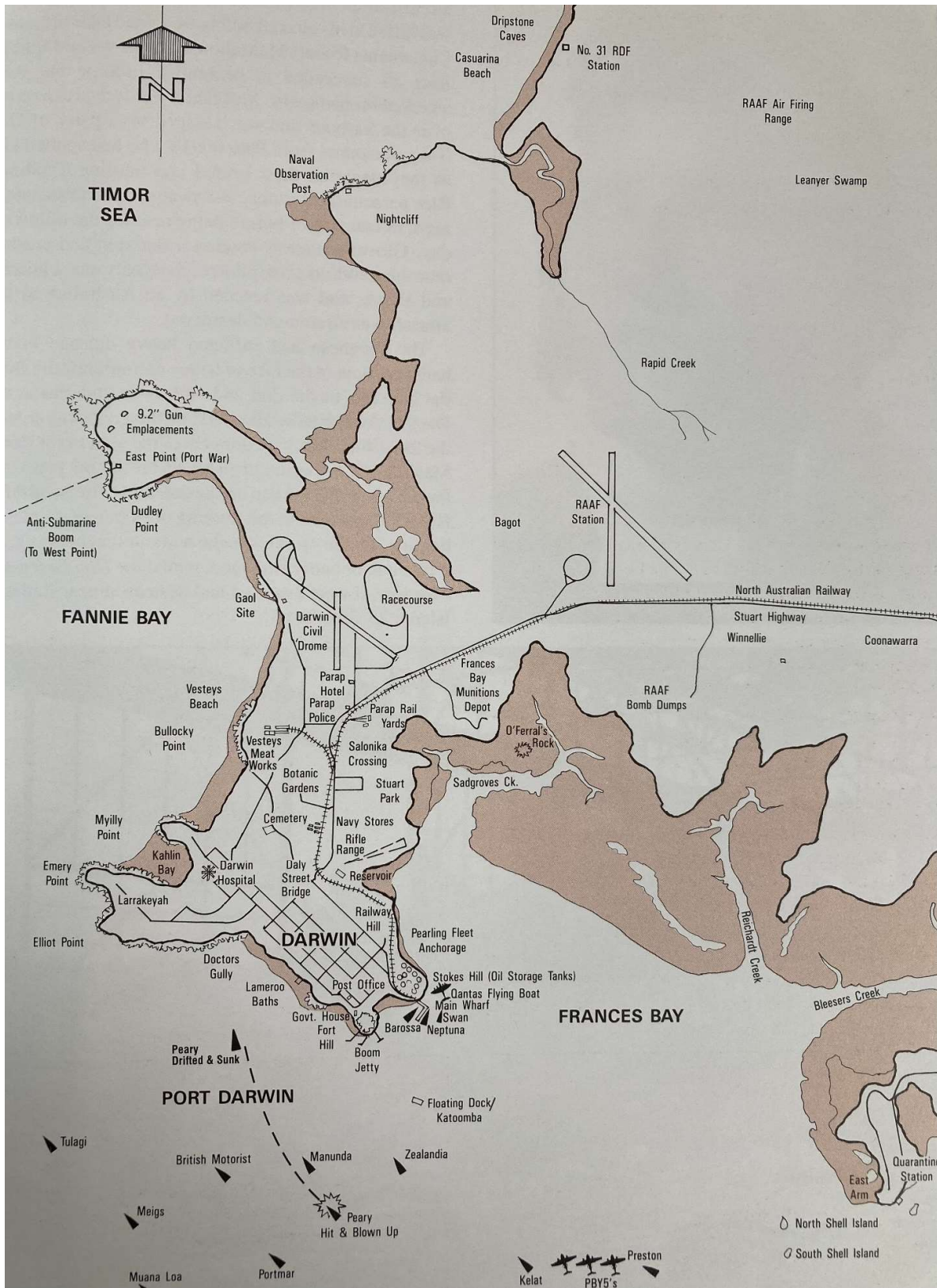
---

<sup>6</sup> Diary of Sergeant Allan Brayne, undated entry, Australian War Memorial [hereafter AWM] PR03202; and letter from Sergeant Gordon Birt to Meg, 7 March 1942, AWM PR87/170.

<sup>7</sup> Donovan, *Defending the Northern Gateway*, 113.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Lewis, *A War at Home* (Darwin: Tall Stories, 1999), 15. See also Paul Hasluck, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Four – Civil, vol. II: The Government and the People, 1942–1945* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1970), 93.

<sup>9</sup> Warrant Officer Keith Martin, manuscript of narrative entitled “Air Raid Red, Darwin, 19 February 1942”, AWM PR03686.



Map of first Darwin raids, 19 February 1942

Bob Alford, *Darwin's Air War* (1991)

Darwin's ill-equipped defence was not aided by a lack of warning of the approach of Japanese aircraft. At 9.35 am on 19 February, Father John McGrath of the Catholic Mission on Bathurst Island reported to the civil radio station in Darwin that a large air formation was approaching from the north-west.<sup>10</sup> This was reported in turn to the RAAF, but no alarm was raised. One of the operators at the radio station, P.J. Chapman, was indignant that "we gave the R.A.A.F. 23 minutes warning of Japs and they had not taken any notice of it".<sup>11</sup> It is possible that RAAF Operations may have believed the approaching aircraft to be American P-40 Kittyhawks returning to Darwin due to poor weather.<sup>12</sup> But Justice Charles Lowe, who later carried out a Commission of Inquiry into the attacks of 19 February, wrote in his report, "I find it difficult to accept this explanation".<sup>13</sup> Whatever the reason, warning of the impending attack was not passed on until it was far too late.<sup>14</sup> In a letter to Prime Minister John Curtin, Hilda Abbott — wife of the Northern Territory Administrator, C.L.A. Abbott — wrote, "the first bomb fell before even the alert had finished".<sup>15</sup>

Those in Darwin took shelter as best they could. Sergeant A. Fletcher was at the RAAF base, "lazily scanning a magazine being halfway between the states of sleep and wakefulness" when the raid began. "The sky was packed with formation after formation", Fletcher wrote in his diary. "All Jap. planes and all with a belly-ful of hate and sudden death." The "fascinating and deadly" sound of the Japanese Zero aircraft crackled overhead as he crouched in a trench.<sup>16</sup> Radio operator Chapman dove into a trench when the attack began. He recorded in his diary that he sat, "frightened as hell", listening to the "terrific rumbles" and "incessant explosions" of the raid.<sup>17</sup> In a convent in Darwin, Sister S.M. Eucharia, her fellow nuns and the children in their care had no time to get to a trench. Sister Eucharia later wrote that the nuns put the children under the beds, knelt beside them and "prayed as we have never prayed before". They heard a nearby building explode and rain debris on the convent roof, but the convent itself was

---

<sup>10</sup> Alan Powell, *The Shadow's Edge* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2007), 75.

<sup>11</sup> Diary of P.J. Chapman, 19 February 1942, AWM PR00011.

<sup>12</sup> Powell, *The Shadow's Edge*, 75; and Lewis, *A War at Home*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> 'Bombing of Darwin: Report by Mr. Justice Lowe', NAA: A431, 1949/687, 12, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=66354>, accessed 31 January 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Lockwood, *Australia Under Attack*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> [Personal Papers of Prime Minister Curtin] Correspondence "A" [V.Z. Aarons – A.J. Ayres, includes personal account of bombing of Darwin by Mrs Hilda Abbott, representations from H. Alderman, Arms, Explosives and Munitions Workers Federation, W.P. Ashley], NAA: M1415, 35, 5, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=1515822>, accessed 31 January 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Diary of Sergeant A. Fletcher, 8 March 1942, AWM PR01225.

<sup>17</sup> Diary of P.J. Chapman, 19 February 1942, AWM PR00011.

untouched.<sup>18</sup> Sister Eucharía felt that strafing from low flying planes was worse than high-level bombing because “the planes ... seemed so terribly close”.<sup>19</sup> Corporal Arnold William Teague, a pay clerk with the RAAF, expressed similar feelings in a letter to his father: “you hear the planes coming down at you, and the crackle of their guns and the bullets spattering round the top of the trench, then they have passed, and are followed by others.”<sup>20</sup>

While most people took shelter and waited out the raids in a state of fear, some went on the offensive. When Lieutenant Robert Brodribb saw Japanese dive bombers targeting the RAAF aerodrome, he thought “we’d have a chance to have a screed at them”.<sup>21</sup> He mustered five men and together they took two Lewis guns from the store tent to try and answer Japanese fire. As they sought to set up their guns, they were subjected to a dive gunning attack. “It wasn’t too pleasant I assure you”, Brodribb later wrote. “[W]e hugged good old terra firma in no uncertain manner.”<sup>22</sup> Undeterred, Brodribb and his comrades continued setting up their guns and gave “due attention” to Japanese aircraft in the area.<sup>23</sup> Not all of Darwin’s anti-aircraft fire was as spontaneous. Anti-aircraft gun crews fired on the enemy in a “valiant but hopeless” effort to defend the town.<sup>24</sup> The Japanese aircraft continued their destructive flight over Darwin, “completely ignoring the A.A. fire which was exploding beneath them”.<sup>25</sup>

During the first raid, Japanese aircraft attacked key administrative buildings.<sup>26</sup> Administrator Abbott’s office was destroyed. Though he and his wife survived the raid, Abbott sustained a perforated ear drum from “bomb concussion”.<sup>27</sup> The Abbotts’ Indigenous maid, Daisy Martin, was killed when a concrete block from a damaged building at the administrator’s residence fell on top of her.<sup>28</sup> The Australian flag flying at Darwin’s Government House was torn by Japanese strafing. Realising its significance as the first flag to be damaged by enemy

---

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Sister S.M. Eucharía to Mum, Dad and Boys, 12 April 1942, AWM PR91/171.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Corporal Arnold William ‘Bill’ Teague to Father, undated, AWM PR04288.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Lieutenant Robert Brodribb to unknown recipient, undated, AWM PR00049.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Diary of Gunner John Lawrence, February 1942, AWM 3DRL/1289.

<sup>25</sup> Diary of W.J. Henderson, 19 February 1942, AWM PR05017.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis and Ingman, *Carrier Attack Darwin 1942*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Administrator C.L.A. Abbott, letter to the Secretary, Department of the Interior, 27 February 1942, in “Bombing of Darwin: Report by Mr. Justice Lowe”, NAA: A431, 1949/687, 261.

<sup>28</sup> [Personal Papers of Prime Minister Curtin] Correspondence “A” [V.Z. Aarons – A.J. Ayres, includes personal account of bombing of Darwin by Mrs Hilda Abbott, representations from H. Alderman, Arms, Explosives and Munitions Workers Federation, W.P. Ashley], NAA: M1415, 35, 5; and Powell, *The Shadow’s Edge*, 87.

attacks on the Australian mainland, Abbott donated it to the Australian War Memorial; it remains in the National Collection today.<sup>29</sup>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

044607

Ruins of the Darwin Post Office, 19 February 1942

Photographer unknown, AWM 044607

Darwin's Post Office was destroyed and ten people — including Postmaster Hurtle Bald, his wife Alice and daughter Iris — were killed.<sup>30</sup> Iris's sweetheart, W.J. Henderson, manager of Cable and Wireless Ltd., went to find her immediately after the raid. Instead he found a scene of destruction and devastation: "I stopped and I guess I must have nearly died, for I couldn't recognise the place. It just wasn't there." Henderson "just stood and watched" as the family's bodies were carried out of the wreckage of the Post Office one by one. "I could have screamed", he wrote. "I thought I'd go mad." He was in such a daze that he was unaware of someone leading him away. Back in the cable office, Henderson overcame his shock enough

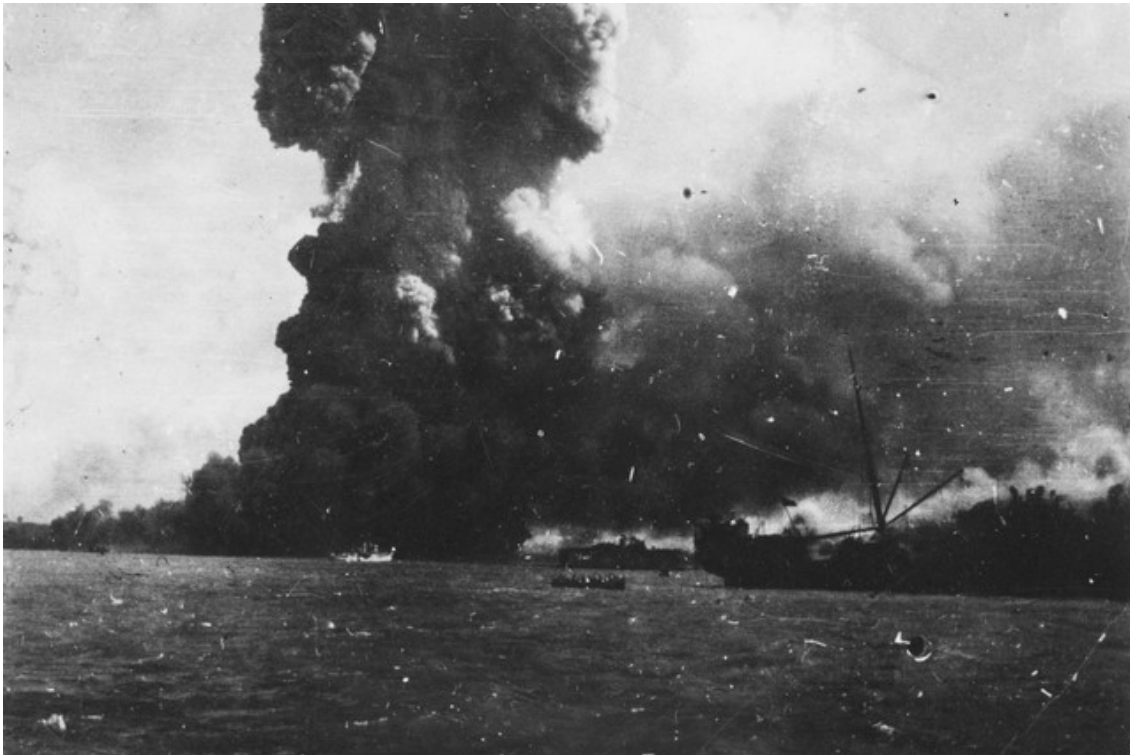
---

<sup>29</sup> See Australian War Memorial, "Bomb-damaged Australian flag from the Administrator's Residence, Darwin, 1942", *Australian War Memorial* (2022), <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C146392?image=13>, accessed 16 February 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Lockwood, *Australia Under Attack*, 85.

to notice that the transmitter was still running “as though nothing had happened when my little world had collapsed round my ears”.<sup>31</sup>

As well as targeting the town, Japanese bombers carried out a concentrated attack on shipping in the harbour. American destroyer USS *Peary* was sunk, with 88 of its company killed.<sup>32</sup> Ships such as SS *Zealandia* and MV *British Motorist* were sunk, while others, such as the Australian hospital ship *Manunda*, were damaged.<sup>33</sup> Captain Thomas Roberts was aboard the depot ship HMAS *Platypus* when the raid began. Though he heard no warning, Roberts was able to make his way to his own ship, the auxiliary patrol boat HMAS *Vigilant*, which he navigated into more open waters, away from the bombs. The undamaged *Vigilant* was able to carry out rescue work in the harbour, helping deal with the dead and wounded from beached US troop ship SS *Portmar*.<sup>34</sup> The ammunition ship MV *Neptuna* was set on fire during the first



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

042895

MV *Neptuna* exploding in Darwin harbour, 19 February 1942

Photographer unknown, AWM 042895

<sup>31</sup> Diary of W.J. Henderson, 19 February 1942, AWM PR05017.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis and Ingman, *Carrier Attack Darwin 1942*, 165–170.

<sup>33</sup> Gill, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Two – Navy, vol. I: Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942*, 595.

<sup>34</sup> Captain T.F. Roberts, recollections entitled “Darwin Blitz, 19 February 1942”, AWM PR83/200; and Lewis and Ingman, *Carrier Attack Darwin 1942*, 184, 193.

raid and eventually exploded.<sup>35</sup> The noise was so loud that radio operator Chapman “thought the end of the world had come”.<sup>36</sup> Delphin Cubillo, a traditional custodian of the Larrakia people in Darwin, was thrown onto his back by the force of the blast and saw a pylon from the jetty thrown into the air as if it were a matchstick. He later learnt that his brother, John, was among the wharf workers killed when *Neptuna* exploded.<sup>37</sup>

The all-clear was sounded at 10.40 am, but Darwin was allowed little time to recover.<sup>38</sup> As Corporal Teague wrote, “the boys began yelling again, and, looking up, we saw a flight of twenty-seven bombers coming over, almost directly over us, out of the clouds, at a great height”.<sup>39</sup> The second raid began just before midday.<sup>40</sup> The aircraft Teague saw comprised the first of two waves — each 27 strong — that targeted the RAAF aerodrome in Darwin. The Japanese assailants were successful in destroying the two hangars and several other important buildings at the aerodrome.<sup>41</sup> In dreadful awe of their accuracy and precision, W.J. Henderson wrote that the Japanese attackers’ handiwork was “a marvellous piece of bombing”.<sup>42</sup> The second raid lasted only 20 minutes.<sup>43</sup>

Corporal Teague — who had lost several fillings to the force of the bombs falling on the RAAF base — emerged from his trench and resumed the role of stretcher-bearer. He saw a man who had been killed by a high-fragmentation anti-personnel bomb, also known as a daisy cutter. The man’s body was “so burnt and mutilated that we couldn’t even try to pick him up”. While the man Teague found was disfigured beyond recognition, Teague later found his own glasses undamaged beneath the rubble of a building.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Powell, *The Shadow’s Edge*, 80.

<sup>36</sup> Diary of P.J. Chapman, 19 February 1942, AWM PR00011.

<sup>37</sup> Danusha Cubillo and Michael Bell, “Knowledge gained, knowledge shared: our voices from the past” [video], Vital Issues Program, *Parliamentary Library* (10 November 2021), [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/Vis/vis2122/KnowledgeGainedKnowledgeShared](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/Vis/vis2122/KnowledgeGainedKnowledgeShared), accessed 12 February 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Hasluck, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Four – Civil, vol. II: The Government and the People, 1942–1945*, 140.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Corporal Teague to Father, undated, AWM PR04288.

<sup>40</sup> Lockwood, *Australia Under Attack*, 120.

<sup>41</sup> Douglas Gillison, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Three – Air, vol. I: Royal Australian Air Force, 1929–1942* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1962), 429.

<sup>42</sup> Diary of W.J. Henderson, 19 February 1942, AWM PR05017.

<sup>43</sup> Gillison, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Three – Air, vol. I: Royal Australian Air Force, 1929–1942*, 429.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Corporal Teague to Father, undated, AWM PR04288.



Though 19 February marked a decided Japanese victory, it was also the day on which a Japanese prisoner of war was captured on Australian soil for the first time. Japanese pilot Petty Officer Hajime Toyoshima was captured by Tiwi Islander Matthias Ulungura after Toyoshima's Zero aircraft crash landed on Melville Island.<sup>45</sup> Ulungura crept up behind Toyoshima, put an axe at his back and said, "Stick 'em up".<sup>46</sup> Police Sergeant 2nd Class Gordon Birt told his sister that Ulungura had held up the prisoner this way because "he had seen it done in pictures in Darwin".<sup>47</sup>



The damage was extensive, and the casualty count of some 250 killed and more than 300 wounded was the largest of any attack on mainland Australia during the war.<sup>48</sup> But the raids on 19 February 1942 were only the first two of 64 raids carried out by Japanese forces on the Darwin area over the course of the next 21 months.<sup>49</sup>

After being captured by Matthias Ulungura, Sergeant Hajime Toyoshima (left) was handed over to Sergeant Leslie J. Powell (right), 23rd Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers

Photographer unknown, AWM P00022.001

In the immediate aftermath of the first two raids, Darwin was in a state of confusion. Most women and children had already been evacuated from Darwin as a result of a Cabinet decision in December 1941. On 19 February 1942, the remaining civilians — except those required to carry out "necessary works" — were evacuated from Darwin or fled of their own volition.<sup>50</sup> Among the evacuees was Sister Eucharis, who left Darwin a couple of hours after the second raid. As there was limited space in the army truck heading south to Adelaide River, Sister

<sup>45</sup> Powell, *The Shadow's Edge*, 90–91.

<sup>46</sup> Geoffrey Gray, "Labour and surveillance in northern Australia, 1939–45", in Joan Beaumont and Allison Cadzow (eds), *Serving Our Country* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018), 167; and Lockwood, *Australia Under Attack*, 153.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Sergeant Birt to Meg, 7 March 1942, AWM PR87/170.

<sup>48</sup> Gill, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Two – Navy, vol. I: Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942*, 595; Stanley, "The myths of the Darwin raids", 39; and Thomas J. Rogers, "Bombing Darwin", *Wartime*, 90 (Autumn 2020), 22.

<sup>49</sup> Dennis et al., "Darwin, Bombing of", in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*.

<sup>50</sup> Hasluck, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Four – Civil, vol. II: The Government and the People, 1942–1945*, 141; and "Bombing of Darwin: Report by Mr. Justice Lowe", NAA: A431, 1949/687, 14; and diary of Warrant Officer Noel Sheedy, undated entry, pp. 26–27, AWM PR03199.

Eucharia and her fellow evacuees were forced to leave most of their belongings behind.<sup>51</sup> Those who fled did so in response to the prevailing fear that the attacks were the prelude to an invasion of the Australian mainland, designed to soften up the area before a full-scale attack. The Darwin raids were actually aimed at eliminating potential counterattacks as Japan invaded Timor. On the afternoon of 19 February, however, the ill-founded fear that invasion was imminent was enough to cause an exodus from Darwin.<sup>52</sup>

Though the degree of panic has since been contested by historians, radio operator Chapman wrote that he witnessed “[c]omplete chaos with people streaming out of Darwin in pannicy [sic] flight – few possessions clutched under their arms, on foot, on bike by car and lorry, anything to get away”.<sup>53</sup> Some members of the armed services fled Darwin after the raid. Justice Charles Lowe reported that men were found at Batchelor, Adelaide River and Daly Waters, and claimed – probably falsely – that one man managed to make it as far as Melbourne.<sup>54</sup> While some military personnel did leave Darwin after the raids, this was the likely the result of confused orders regarding a rendezvous point rather than a mass urge to desert.<sup>55</sup> Yet disorder was not quick to leave Darwin. Days after the raids, war correspondent Flying Officer Clement Hemery wrote in his diary, “absolute bloody confusion reigns supreme”.<sup>56</sup>

Following the attacks on 19 February, Darwin’s defences were strengthened. New air bases were established further south in the Northern Territory to disperse aircraft and equipment away from Darwin.<sup>57</sup> Civilians were moved out of Darwin and, over the following weeks and months, more servicepeople moved in. Many of these were experienced Australian Imperial Force soldiers returned from the Middle East; by March 1942, there were also 5,000 American personnel in Darwin.<sup>58</sup> For many military personnel, the experience of Darwin under attack

---

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Sister S.M. Eucharia to Mum, Dad and Boys, 12 April 1942, AWM PR91/171.

<sup>52</sup> Dennis et al., “Darwin, Bombing of”, in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*.

<sup>53</sup> Diary of P.J. Chapman, 19 February 1942, AWM PR00011. For examples of this debate, see Alan Powell, “The Darwin ‘panic’, 1942”, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, 3 (1983), 3–9; Stanley, “The myths of the Darwin raids”, 39; and Hasluck, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Four – Civil, vol. II: The Government and the People, 1942–1945*, 141–144, 146.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Bombing of Darwin - Report by Mr. Justice Lowe’, NAA: A431, 1949/687, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Powell, *The Shadow’s Edge*, 85; and Donovan, *Defending the Northern Gateway*, 114–115.

<sup>56</sup> Diary of Flying Officer Clement Hemery, 21 February 1942, AWM PR00451.

<sup>57</sup> Lewis and Ingman, *Carrier Attack Darwin 1942*, 240; and Donovan, *Defending the Northern Gateway*, 119–121.

<sup>58</sup> Donovan, *Defending the Northern Gateway*, 119–120; and Dennis et al., “Darwin”, in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*.

began after 19 February, which is why considering the whole period — not just the first two raids — is important in order to understand life in Fortress Darwin.

The personal accounts of those in Darwin and neighbouring areas between February 1942 and the final raid of November 1943 present recurring themes. Life in Darwin was punctuated by frequent attacks, accompanied by ongoing tension and uncertainty as to when the next raid would commence. There was also a need to adjust to an unfamiliar and often uncomfortable environment. Between the demands of ongoing raids and acclimatising to a new place, however, life in Darwin during this period could be boring: the monotony weighed heavily on many, creating a need to seek ways to pass the time.

Air raids became a regular occurrence in Darwin after 19 February. Japanese forces often attacked on consecutive days or on days close together. There would then be several weeks without raids, and longer periods when the raids lessened in frequency in 1943.<sup>59</sup> The effect of this — especially in the early months after 19 February — was that those in Darwin lived in a state of uncertainty, never knowing if a raid was the last in a wave, or if there were more to follow. Following four consecutive days of raids in June 1942, radio operator Chapman noted everyone was “on tenterhooks expecting more raids” – the next raid did not occur until late July.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> “Enemy air attacks Darwin”, undated, AWM54 812/3/12/2.

<sup>60</sup> Diary of P.J. Chapman, 16 June 1942, AWM PR00011; and “Enemy air activity – Darwin area”, April–August 1942, AWM54 625/3/1, pt. 2–3.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

014571

Bomb-damaged house in Darwin, 2 April 1943

Photographer: Harry Turner, AWM 014571

Most accounts of Japanese bombing raids from those on the ground in Darwin were written after the fact. Sergeant Charles Walmsley of No. 76 Squadron, RAAF, however, chose to write in his diary as the attacks were playing out. His colourful description and stream-of-consciousness style account of what was happening and how he was feeling provide insight into what it was like to endure a Japanese attack in Darwin:

It is now 4.10A.M. and the sirens are wailing & the bombers can be heard they are heading this way, they have just passed overhead ... listen to those eggs come down, they are heading this way again silence 1 minute gone & they are past again, hello their [sic] goes machine gun fire, a Kittyhawk that took off about ½ hour ago has sighted them & having a go ... boy & are the ack-ack filling the sky up now, I'm glad I'm on the ground, or I should say half under it. I don't think they can have any bombs left now, pardon me it sounds like that noise again, they sound to be about over Darwin proper boy does that place take a hiding. ... They seem to have had enough for one night, there goes the all clear at last, it

lasted 2¼ hours the longest raid I've been in, its [sic] now 6.30 ... time to get up, curse the yellow cows interrupting my beauty sleep.<sup>61</sup>

Other diary entries and letters of those stationed in and around Darwin recorded experiences of sheltering and watching on during Japanese attacks similar to that of Sergeant Walmsley.<sup>62</sup>

More frequent than raids were air raid alerts. The alarm was often sounded and those in Darwin would respond accordingly.<sup>63</sup> Flying Officer Hemery wrote that 5 March 1943 was “chiefly characterised by 5 alarms (all false)”.<sup>64</sup> These alerts ensured that those in Darwin were always aware of the potential for another attack and lived in a state of unease. Japanese aircraft carried out many reconnaissance missions over the Darwin area.<sup>65</sup> Their appearance would trigger air raid alerts, contributing to the anxious atmosphere, as those on the ground were never sure which planes were passing over and which would leave destruction in their wake.<sup>66</sup>

Though many grew accustomed to alerts, air raids, and the sight of Japanese reconnaissance planes, fear and anxiety remained features of life in Darwin. Sergeant Allan Brayne of the RAAF's No. 3 Radio Installation and Maintenance Unit arrived in Darwin in December 1942. He was kept on edge by frequent air raids and not knowing when the enemy would next strike. Such was his heightened level of anxiety that, upon hearing a noise in the bush one day, he had a bullet loaded and ready to fire before realising it had been caused by a wallaby.<sup>67</sup> For some, the constant state of anxiety became too much. In March 1943, Flying Officer Ralph James of No. 2 Squadron farewelled a close friend who was being sent away from Darwin. James wrote that his friend's “nerves had gone to pieces and [he] was really a sick man”.<sup>68</sup>

The raids turned Pilot Officer Malcolm Taylor from No. 31 Squadron to thoughts of the plight of others. While Germany was Australia's enemy during the war, Taylor empathised with those subjected to ongoing Allied bombing raids in Germany. He wrote to his mother, “I

---

<sup>61</sup> Diary of Sergeant Charles Walmsley, 22 November 1942, AWM PR00742.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, diary of Flying Officer Hemery, 19 February 1942, AWM PR00451; and diary of P.J. Chapman, 15 June 1942, AWM PR00011.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, diary of Able Seaman Denis Harrison, 27 November 1942, AWM PR00143; and diary of Gunner Lawrence, 5 June 1942, AWM 3DRL/1289.

<sup>64</sup> Diary of Flying Officer Hemery, 5 March 1942, AWM PR00451.

<sup>65</sup> “Enemy air activity – Darwin area”, February 1942–November 1943, AWM54 625/3/1, pt. 1–13.

<sup>66</sup> Diary of P.J. Chapman, 26 February 1942, AWM PR00011; and letter from Sergeant Birt to Mother, 10 March 1942, AWM PR87/170.

<sup>67</sup> Diary of Sergeant Brayne, 27 May 1943, AWM PR03202.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Flying Officer Ralph James to Beryl James, 27 March 1943, AWM PR00661.

just hate to think what is happening to the Germans these days – even the few bombs that I saw, went off with a mighty bang”.<sup>69</sup>

While Japanese attacks caused some to live an anxious existence, and others to ponder the plight of others, there were also those who felt the inconvenience of raids, which interrupted the activities of daily life. In a letter home to his mother, Sergeant Birt wrote, “Those damned Japs always seem to catch me at dinner time, just as I am halfway through it”.<sup>70</sup> He grew increasingly annoyed that air raid alerts kept sounding just as he was about to eat his dessert. One day he warned, “Everytime I am getting my sweets there is an alarm so get ready”; sure enough, the siren sounded as soon as he began to eat.<sup>71</sup> Sergeant Birt was so desperate not to let Japanese attacks ruin his dessert that on one occasion he snuck back into the mess before the all-clear sounded so he could finish his pudding.<sup>72</sup>

While those stationed in Darwin adjusted to a life regularly disrupted by air raids, those not from the Darwin area — which was the vast majority — were also having to get used to a new and uncomfortable environment. Darwin’s tropical climate felt foreign to many of the military personnel stationed there. “Today is hot as Hell”, Sergeant Birt wrote to his sister. “I am writing this in my office ... and I am minus shirt and singlet, and still feel hot.”<sup>73</sup> The humidity was such that Flying Officer James told his wife in a letter that his hair was wet with perspiration all day. “I have to wash and oil it twice a day to stop it rotting”, he wrote.<sup>74</sup> The extreme heat made for extremely arduous working conditions.<sup>75</sup> In December 1942, as the wet season closed in, Gunner John Lawrence of the 2/1st Anti-Aircraft Regiment recorded in his diary that, during a gun drill, “some of the men fainted from the loss of salt from their bodies owing to excess sweating and perspiration” and were required to take salt pills “to offset the loss of salt from the body”.<sup>76</sup>

In the wet season — lasting approximately from November until April — rain and storms were frequent and intense. Pilot Officer Taylor wrote to his mother, “It rained all this morning,

---

<sup>69</sup> Letter from Pilot Officer Malcolm Taylor to Mum, 14 November 1943, AWM PR01979.

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Sergeant Birt to Mother, 19 March 1942, AWM PR87/170.

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Sergeant Birt to Mother, 23 March 1942, AWM PR87/170.

<sup>72</sup> Letter from Sergeant Birt to Mother, 17 March 1942, AWM PR87/170.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Sergeant Birt to Meg, 7 March 1942, AWM PR87/170.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 25 February 1943, AWM PR00661.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, letter from Lance Sergeant Frank Anderson to unknown recipient, 1 November 1943, AWM2018.1283.1; and diary of Warrant Officer Sheedy, undated entry, pp. 30–31, AWM PR03199.

<sup>76</sup> Diary of Gunner John Lawrence, 11 December 1942, AWM 3DRL/1289.

and I mean rain – everything just seems to come down all at once”.<sup>77</sup> Enemy planes were, however, less likely to carry out raids during Darwin’s forceful rain. Flying Officer James felt that that poor weather was advantageous for Allied air crews. “The rain and dirty weather are a godsend up here, it’s harder flying in storms; but the Nip can’t follow you and even if he tried he couldn’t see you.”<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, rain could make camp conditions uncomfortable for service personnel in the area. Lance Sergeant Frank Anderson of the 5th Battalion noted that, when the rains arrived, “a bed off the ground is a ‘must’ otherwise one is likely to be washed away”.<sup>79</sup>

Even when it was not raining, military camps could be quite rudimentary and uncomfortable, requiring those in camp to put time and effort into improving their sleeping arrangements. Leading Aircraftman David Howdle of the No. 55 Operational Base Unit recorded in his diary that he had to fill a bag with grass in order to have a mattress on which to sleep.<sup>80</sup> Driver Norman Tulloh of the 124th Reserve Motor Transport Company used a tent fly as a mattress one night.<sup>81</sup> For a more permanent sleeping situation, he built his own bedframe, as did others in Darwin.<sup>82</sup>

Food was another aspect of camp life that often left much to be desired. Signalman Ronald Barber was with the 2/4th Battalion, which had served for two years in the Middle East before returning to Australia in mid-1942, where it defended Darwin.<sup>83</sup> Barber was less than impressed at the inadequate bread supply in Darwin, lamenting in his diary, “Thus perishes one of our M.E. [Middle East] visions of a better and more plentiful supply of food in our own land”.<sup>84</sup> Corporal Allen Walker of the 118th General Transport Company was likewise disappointed. He felt that the food came “in quantities which are an insult to a man who is expected to do a decent days [sic] work”.<sup>85</sup> Dissatisfaction with food was common. In March 1942, Flying

---

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Pilot Officer Taylor to Mum, 31 October 1943, AWM PR01979

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 15 December 1942, AWM PR00661.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Lance Sergeant Anderson to unknown recipient, 24 September 1943, AWM2018.1283.1.

<sup>80</sup> Diary of Leading Aircraftman David Howdle, 15 April 1943, AWM PR00725.

<sup>81</sup> Diary of Driver Norman Tulloh, 14 June 1942, AWM PR01048.

<sup>82</sup> Diary of Driver Tulloh, 16–19 May 1942, AWM PR01048; and diary of Sergeant Brayne, 30 December 1942, AWM PR03202.

<sup>83</sup> Australian War Memorial, “2/4th Australian Infantry Battalion”, *Australian War Memorial* (2022), <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U56047>, accessed 15 March 2022.

<sup>84</sup> Diary of Signalman Ronald Barber, 18 August 1942, AWM PR05339.

<sup>85</sup> Diary of Corporal Allen Walker, 9 May 1943, AWM PR04882.

Officer Hemery described the food as “terrible”.<sup>86</sup> A couple of weeks later, his assessment was no better: “Things bad. Food getting worse.”<sup>87</sup>

Poor camp rations meant that many of those serving in Darwin relied on family and friends to keep them supplied with more satisfying victuals. Many diaries written in Darwin at this time mentioned the welcome relief of receiving a food parcel from home, and letters often included expressions of gratitude to families for the food they had sent.<sup>88</sup> Letters would also sometimes contain requests for specific food items or advice about what was best to send. In August 1942, Corporal Teague wrote home asking for a tin of Nestle’s sweetened condensed milk; he had a tin of cocoa in his possession and was hoping to “make things that would taste almost like chocolate milk shakes”.<sup>89</sup> Flying Officer James requested that his wife refrain from sending any sweets as “they seem too tacky up here”, asking that she instead send him tinned fruit which was “hard to get here”.<sup>90</sup> As well as being supplied by families and friends, food and supply parcels were occasionally provided by the Australian Comforts Fund.<sup>91</sup>

As well as extreme weather, uncomfortable camp conditions, and unsatisfactory food, the = wildlife in Darwin presented its own challenges. Flies and mosquitoes flourished in Darwin’s tropical climate. In April 1942, Driver Tulloh wrote, “Mozzies a bloody nuisance tonight – driving us crazy”.<sup>92</sup> Sandflies were particularly plaguing. According to Flying Officer James, they “raise whacking great lumps during the night; generally on elbows, knees and tail, and if you happen to scratch, boy-oh-boy, they fester and hurt like the devil”.<sup>93</sup>

Larger creatures were also a problem. Flying Officer James told his wife, “This place is just lousy with snakes and centipedes & scorpions, and even our swimming pool has a new tribe of crocs in it at present”.<sup>94</sup> Sergeant Brayne was writing a letter on his bunk one night when something brushed against his foot. He kicked at it, thinking it was an insect, only to find that

---

<sup>86</sup> Diary of Flying Officer Hemery, 2 March 1942, AWM PR00451.

<sup>87</sup> Diary of Flying Officer Hemery, 16 March 1942, AWM PR00451.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, letter from Corporal Teague to Mother, Father and Mairm, 10 August 1942, AWM PR04288; and diary of Signalman Barber, 23 May 1943, AWM PR05339.

<sup>89</sup> Letter from Corporal Teague to Mother, Father and Mairm, 10 August 1942, AWM PR04288.

<sup>90</sup> Letters from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 19 September 1942 [misdated as February] and 15 October 1942, AWM PR00661.

<sup>91</sup> Diary of Sergeant Brayne, 31 December 1942, AWM PR03202; and diary of Bombardier Rex Brown, 16 April 1943, AWM PR06370.

<sup>92</sup> Diary of Driver Tulloh, 29 April 1942, AWM PR01048.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 24 September 1942, AWM PR00661.

<sup>94</sup> Letter from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 22 January 1943, AWM PR00661.



it was a death adder: “There followed a leap on to the bed – a grab for the bayonet and a wild slashing of the intruder”.<sup>95</sup> Others in Darwin came into close contact with snakes.<sup>96</sup> During a visit to a lonely outpost in December 1942, Corporal Teague encountered a 12-foot rock python crushing the camp’s pet puppy. The puppy was saved when the snake was shot. Teague heard that the men at the same camp shot a 15-foot python a few days later.<sup>97</sup>

While those in Darwin were kept on edge by frequent air raids, boredom was a major part of life. There were few forms of entertainment in Darwin, and servicepeople were forced to find ways to keep themselves occupied. Of course, military personnel had their work to do, and this kept them busy much of the time. The work itself, however, could be rather dull and repetitive, particularly for those driving trucks or unloading ships, removed from the action seen by those who flew planes or manned anti-aircraft



RAAF personnel loading a truck, February 1943

Photographer unknown, AWM NWA0219

guns.<sup>98</sup> The busyness of work was not enough to keep boredom at bay. “Just a day” was a common entry in Leading Aircraftman Howdle’s diary, and others noted in diaries and letters that things were quiet between raids.<sup>99</sup> Flying Officer James told his wife that the days “all seem so alike here darling that unless there’s a church service no-one seems to know what day it is”.<sup>100</sup> The tedium was, of course, broken by raids. Corporal Teague wrote home to his family that since “we can’t expect the little men to leave us alone all the time”, at least their attacks

<sup>95</sup> Diary of Sergeant Brayne, 12 November 1942, AWM PR03202.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, diary of Leading Aircraftman David Howdle, 26 May 1943, AWM PR00725; and letter from Corporal Teague to My Dear Family, 7 December 1942, AWM PR04288.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Corporal Teague to My Dear Family, 7 December 1942, AWM PR04288.

<sup>98</sup> See, for example, diary of Signalman Ronald Barber, AWM PR05339; and diary of Driver Tulloh, AWM PR01048.

<sup>99</sup> See, for example, diary of Leading Aircraftman David Howdle, 11 and 13 September 1943, 23 October 1943 and 9 November 1943, AWM PR00725. See also diary of Corporal Allen Walker, 20 October 1943, AWM PR04882; letters from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 5 September 1942, 12 December 1943 and 17 January 1943, AWM PR00661; and diary of Flying Officer Hemery, 7 March 1942, AWM PR00451.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 19 October 1942, AWM PR00661.

“relieve the deadly monotony”.<sup>101</sup> Reprieve from this monotony was sought in a variety of ways.

Attending picture shows to watch films was a common activity mentioned in letters and diaries.<sup>102</sup> Going to the pictures was a significant enough diversion that many took the time to note in letters and diaries the name of the show they had seen, what they thought about it, and some occasionally recommended a picture to those at home.<sup>103</sup> Sport was another popular pastime, including impromptu games of football and cricket, organised matches between different units, and official sports carnival days.<sup>104</sup>

While drinking was restricted by beer rations imposed by the armed services, it gave military personnel something to do, and something to think about when they were bored. Servicepeople eagerly anticipated the beer ration and lamented when there was no beer to be had. In October 1943, Lance Sergeant Anderson wrote home, “Tonight should be beer-issue night and you may well believe that I am looking forward to this event which should place in me in the possession of two bottles”. Anderson rationed his beer issue because “more than one in the evening after working in the sun all day tends to send one a bit ‘loopy’”. He discovered this the hard way after having two pots in succession one day and finding himself “tempted to indulge in a fan dance”.<sup>105</sup> Not everyone chose to exercise restraint in their alcohol consumption. After one beer issue, Leading Aircraftman Howdle wrote, “what a night the boys had, must have had 6 dozen bottles”.<sup>106</sup> The fascination many had with beer was typified in the diary of Signalman Barber, throughout which beer was a common motif. Barber wrote regular updates as to when the next beer ration was, how many bottles he was issued, how long it had been since he had any beer, and how the home brew he had made was coming along.<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Letter from Corporal Teague to Mother, Father and Mairm, 24 October 1942, AWM PR04288.

<sup>102</sup> Diary of Driver Tulloh, 20 June 1942 and 4 July 1942, AWM PR01048; diary of Signalman Barber, 18 August 1942, 14 October 1942 and 23 June 1943, AWM PR05339; diary of Able Seaman Harrison, 31 October 1942, AWM PR00143; and diary of Bombardier Brown, 31 March 1943, AWM PR06370.

<sup>103</sup> Letter from Pilot Officer Taylor to Mum, 31 October 1943, AWM PR01979; diary of Driver Tulloh, 22 August 1942, AWM PR01048; diary of Leading Aircraftman David Howdle, 17 September 1943, 24 September 1943, 28 October 1943 and 5 November 1943, AWM PR00725; and letter from Corporal Teague to Mother, Father and Mairm, 24 October 1942, AWM PR04288.

<sup>104</sup> Diary of Able Seaman Harrison, 8 January 1943, AWM PR00143; letter from Pilot Officer Taylor to Mum, undated, AWM PR01979; diary of Sergeant Charles Walmsley, 6 December 1942, AWM PR00742; diary of Signalman Barber, 12 July 1942, 14 October 1942, 3 June 1943 and 23 June 1943, AWM PR05339; and diary of Driver Tulloh, 12 August 1942, 1 January 1943 and 18 February 1943 AWM PR01048

<sup>105</sup> Letter from Lance Sergeant Anderson to unknown recipient, 13 October 1943, AWM2018.1283.1.

<sup>106</sup> Diary of Leading Aircraftman David Howdle, 28 September 1943, AWM PR00725.

<sup>107</sup> See, for example, diary of Signalman Barber, 12 July 1942, 14 October 1942, 19 November 1942, 13 February 1943, 14 April 1943 and 23 June 1943, AWM PR05339.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

014598

Men playing billiards on a makeshift table in Darwin, 5 April 1943

Photographer: Harry Turner, AWM 014598

Other ways of passing the time in Darwin included reading, gambling, playing two-up and other games, fishing, hunting, swimming, and visiting friends in other camps.<sup>108</sup> Many also took the time to write in a diary or write letters home to their families. As well as offering an occupation for idle hours, writing and receiving letters provided a connection to home and family, enabling servicepeople to maintain relationships despite the distance separating them from their loved ones. The importance of this connection to home and everyday life is evident in the frequency with which those in Darwin noted the arrival or absence of mail, and in the profuseness with which they thanked their families for writing. The arrival of mail had a

---

<sup>108</sup> Letters from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 19 September 1942 and 15 October 1942, AWM PR00661; diary of Driver Tulloh, 12 April 1942, AWM PR01048; letter from Lance Sergeant Anderson to unknown recipient, 24 September 1943, AWM2018.1283.1; diary of Able Seaman Harrison, 11 November 1942, AWM PR00143; diary of Sergeant Brayne, 21 February 1943, AWM PR03202; and Letter from Corporal Teague to My Dear Family, 7 December 1942, AWM PR04288.



Pilot Officer (later Flying Officer) Ralph James with his wife, Beryl, 1942

Photographer: G. McGrath, AWM P02316.004

buoying effect on those who received it. Flying Officer James felt “as happy as I can possibly be away from you” whenever he received mail from his wife, Beryl.<sup>109</sup> Bombardier Rex Brown of 70th Mobile Search Light Battery in the Royal Australian Artillery was similarly heartened by mail. Upon receiving the first letter from his mother while in Darwin, he felt “happy & content & pleased” to think that it came from her.<sup>110</sup>

Being separated from loved ones was another difficult aspect of life in

Darwin, but mail allowed correspondents to feel close to their family and friends in spite of the physical distance that separated them. “Please write again soon”, Flying Officer James told his wife, “‘cos it’s lonely without you; but so much better when your letters arrive”.<sup>111</sup> A lack of mail, however, could exacerbate feelings of separation from loved ones. In February 1943, Signalman Barber wrote in his diary, “No mail lately. Has a very depressing effect”.<sup>112</sup>

On 12 November 1943, Japanese forces carried out an air raid on Darwin and Batchelor airfield approximately 100 kilometres to the south.<sup>113</sup> It was the 64th attack on Darwin — the final raid on mainland Australia. Those in Darwin could not have known this at the time, however, and Japanese aircraft continued to carry out reconnaissance over the area throughout 1944.<sup>114</sup>

The remembrance of Darwin’s experience of air raids throughout 1942 and 1943 has traditionally neglected two key points. The first is that 19 February 1942, though certainly the

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 7 February 1943, AWM PR00661.

<sup>110</sup> Diary of Bombardier Brown, 4 April 1943, AWM PR06370.

<sup>111</sup> Letter from Flying Officer James to Beryl James, 2 October 1942, AWM PR00661.

<sup>112</sup> Diary of Signalman Barber, 13 February 1943, AWM PR05339.

<sup>113</sup> “Report on Raid on Darwin Area 12 Nov 1943”, 12 November 1943, AWM54 625/3/1 pt. 13; and “Enemy Air Raid No. 64 12/11/43”, 12 November 1943, AWM54 625/3/1 pt.13.

<sup>114</sup> Rogers, “Bombing Darwin”, 22.

biggest and most destructive Japanese attack on Australia, was only the beginning; it was not the whole story. In his recollections of the raids on 19 February 1942, Warrant Officer Martin wrote, “The Jap destroyed Darwin, he did not destroy the morale of its troops, as he subsequently learned ... This was only the first round of a long fight, the opening stanza of a song whose closing bars sang victory”.<sup>115</sup> While the first two raids were the most destructive, air raids, and the experience of living through them in Fortress Darwin, continued well beyond that date.

The second point is that there are elements of military service that have been largely overlooked, not only in Darwin but in Australian military history more generally. During the period of Japanese attacks that lasted until 12 November 1943, air raids were a major part of life in Darwin, but these times of fear, tension and danger were interspersed by long periods of monotony, boredom, and general discomfort. Military personnel — and others in Darwin — made the best of their situation, working to make their living arrangements more comfortable and finding ways to help pass the time. These were as much a part of service in Darwin during this period as experiencing air raids. While concerns about the weather, finding a snake in one’s tent, or missing dessert because of an air raid siren may seem irrelevant to the overall narrative of Darwin under attack, these were prominent aspects of life in Darwin at this time.

In highlighting that the story of Fortress Darwin spans more than a single day, and encompasses far more than just air raids, this paper demonstrates the value of taking a broader approach in remembering the bombing of Darwin. Personal documents such as the letters and diaries examined in this paper help us to better understand what it meant to experience and endure life in Fortress Darwin, including on 19 February 1942. These documents present a wider scope through which to consider Darwin under attack. They provide deeper insight into this important period of Australian history, enabling us to remember and reflect with a new perspective on life in Fortress Darwin.

---

<sup>115</sup> Warrant Officer Martin, ‘Air Raid Red, Darwin, 19 February 1942’, AWM PR03686.