

## The bombing of Darwin

### **Japanese air raids on Darwin and northern Australia, 1942–43**

On 19 February 1942 mainland Australia came under attack for the first time when Japanese forces mounted two air raids on Darwin. The two attacks, which were planned and led by the commander responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbor ten weeks earlier, involved 188 attack aircraft which were launched from four Japanese aircraft-carriers in the Timor Sea, and a second raid of 54 land-based bombers. The carrier battle group consisted additionally of two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, seven destroyers, three submarines, and two other heavy cruisers on distant cover.

In the first attack, which began just before 10.00 am, Kate bombers hit shipping, infrastructure and the town; and Val dive bombers escorted by Zero fighters then attacked shipping in the harbour, and the military and civil aerodromes. The attack ceased after about 25 minutes. The second raid, which began around 11.45 am, involved high altitude bombing of the Royal Australian Air Force base by twin-engine machines.

The two raids killed 235 people with a further 300 to 400 wounded. Thirty aircraft were destroyed, including nine out of the ten flying in defence, nine ships in the harbour and two outside were sunk, and some of the civil and military facilities in Darwin were destroyed.

The Japanese lost four aircraft to a spirited defence: two Val bombers and two Zero fighters. One of the fighters crash-landed on Melville Island to Darwin's north, and its pilot was captured by a local Aboriginal man, to become the first prisoner of war taken on Australian soil.

Contrary to widespread belief at the time, the attacks were not a precursor to an invasion. The Japanese were preparing to invade Timor, and anticipated that a disruptive air attack would hinder Darwin's potential as a base from which the Allies could launch a counter-offensive, and at the same time would damage Australian morale. The Japanese also planned to take New Guinea, cutting Australia off from US support. Denying Darwin's ability to act as a base would help achieve that aim.

The air attacks across northern Australia, centring on the Territory, continued until November 1943, by which time the Japanese had raided the Top End over 200 times. The last enemy aircraft was shot down over the Territory in June 1944. During the war other towns in northern Australia were

also the target of Japanese air attack, with bombs dropped on Townsville, Katherine, Wyndham, Derby, Broome and Port Hedland.

## The response

In the hours following the air raids of 19 February, believing that an invasion was imminent, some of Darwin's civilian population began to stream southwards. Approximately half of Darwin's civilian population ultimately fled. The panic in the town was paralleled by confusion at the RAAF base, where personnel were directed in difficult circumstances to other areas in great numbers. Looting and disorder, and impact of the first raids, subsequently led the government to hurriedly appoint a Commission of Inquiry led by Mr Justice Lowe, which issued two reports, one on 27 March and the other on 9 April 1942.

However, within a few months, Darwin was mounting an even more credible defence, which grew to a coordinated response involving fighters, radar, and searchlights. The response grew steadily to involve counterstrike from bombers, largely manned by US forces. Other squadrons involved Dutch and British aircraft joining the Australian effort, and naval units continued to operate against the enemy. By the end of 1942 the tide was beginning to turn and the Japanese started to be pushed back from the lands they had taken in what is now Indonesia and Timor.

## The records

The National Archives and the Australian War Memorial hold a wide range of records relating to the bombing of Darwin. A selection of these records is listed in the table below.

### The first bombings – 19 February 1942

#### National Archives, Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<a href="#">Japanese air raid on Darwin – 19th February 1942</a>	1942	A2684, 872
<a href="#">Press reports of the bombing of Darwin – Advisory War Council agendum 2/1942</a>	1942	A5954, 327/12

#### National Archives, Melbourne

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<a href="#">Darwin air raids – warning measures taken at sea</a>	1942	B6121, 159G

## The aftermath

#### National Archives, Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<a href="#">List of Northern Territory evacuees</a>	1942	A7029, 1

<u>Honours and awards – Darwin raid, February 1942</u>	1942	A2124, 1
<u>Shipping wrecks, Darwin harbour</u>	1946	A432, 1946/855

### National Archives, Melbourne

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Home Security report (includes photographs of the effects of bombing in the Darwin area)</u>	1941–44	MP535/14, NN
<u>RAN personnel killed and injured in raid on Darwin</u>	1942	MP151/1, 429/201/399
<u>Wrecks in Darwin harbour</u>	1942	MP1049/5, 1893/2/101
<u>Compensation for departmental officers in Darwin air raid</u>	1942–44	MP721/1, W530

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## Later bombings

### National Archives, Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Darwin raid number 55 (includes plot of enemy aircraft)</u>	1943	A9696, 207
<u>Intelligence – raid no 62 (night) Darwin, 15–16 September 1943</u>	1943	A11231, 5/81/INT

### National Archives, Melbourne

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Report of air raid on Naval area Darwin, 19 March 1942</u>	1942	MP1049/5, 1806/2/23

### Australian War Memorial

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Bombing of Broome and Wyndham, March 1942</u>	1942	AWM54, 625/3/7
<u>Enemy air raid casualties – Darwin, Broome and Port Hedland</u>	1942–45	AWM54, 812/3/5
<u>Darwin raid number 58, 6 July 1943 – narrative by Wing Commander C Caldwell</u>	1943	AWM54, 625/3/5

## The Lowe Commission of Inquiry

### National Archives, Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Transcript of evidence, Darwin air raid inquiry</u>	1942	A816, 37/301/293
<u>Air raid on Darwin – final report of Commission of Inquiry</u>	1942	A816, 37/301/310
<u>Bombing of Darwin – report by Mr Justice Lowe</u>	1942–49	A431, 1949/687

### National Archives, Melbourne

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Darwin air raid inquiry before Lowe J as Commissioner</u>	1942	MP401/1, CL14687/1
<u>Darwin air raid inquiry – exhibits (includes seven photographs)</u>	1942	MP401/1, CL14687/2
<u>Darwin air raids – report by Mr Justice Lowe</u>	1942–45	MP1185/8, 1806/2/31