SOLDIERING ON

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY
AT HOME AND OVERSEAS

Prepared by
Some of the Boys

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WAR CAME TO AUSTRALIA

On the morning of February 15, 1942, shortly after midnight, a convoy of ships with a naval escort slipped out of Darwin harbour carrying reinforcements of men and material for the forces in Timor. When half-way across the Timor Sea the following day a silver Japanese plane appeared high in the sky. The warships immediately opened fire but the harm was done. It was a reconnaissance plane.

Later the same morning the convoy was heavily bombed by 44 Japanese aircraft. An escorting cruiser maintained a tremendous rate of anti-aircraft fire as the ships zig-zagged to escape the bombs. Many near misses were registered but when the sky cleared of both bombers and shell bursts the convoy was still moving intact.

When approaching Timor on February 17 the convoy about-turned and steamed due south for Darwin, having been ordered to do so by General Sir Archibald Wavell's headquarters in Java. There was some evidence of a trap having been set by an enemy naval squadron.

Just after noon on February 18 the convoy nosed its way back into Darwin harbour. In the town there were many who pondered at the portents of its return, but little did they suspect the horror which was to descend on Darwin on the morrow.

February 19 dawned a sunny day with a few clouds drifting slowly across the sky. Darwin lay bathed in the moist humidity of a tropical morning during the rainy season, quite oblivious of the fact that 17 Japanese bombers, 54 dive bombers and 18 Zero fighters were converging steadily on the town. All around the waters of the blue harbour ships lay awaiting discharge or sailing orders. The town continued its normal existence. Some soldiers were at their posts and others were engaged on defence work, while civilians carried on their ordinary daily business.

So suddenly did the Japanese air fleet appear that Darwin was completely surprised. The alarm on the main battery position near the heart of Darwin brought gunners rushing to their guns—some half clothed, others naked—from their showers and quarters. Approaching the town from the south-east 17 silver Japanese bombers appeared flying in formation at nearly 20,000 feet.

The town was ringed and marked by flashes as the anti-aircraft guns opened fire on the droning bombers. Woolly black bursts showed below and behind them as Darwin moved towards the centre of their bomb sights. Over their target they let their bombs go. The whistle of the falling bombs reached a shrill crescendo culminating in a terrific blast, as they fell among buildings along the foreshore of Darwin. Wreckage was thrown skywards, walls tumbled in and dust and smoke rose from the devastated area.

For the first time bombs had fallen on Australian soil. For the first time Australians had been killed in their own homes by act of war. War had at last really come to Australia.

Simultaneously with the release of the bombs from a high level, the dive bombers
and Zero fighters made their appearance. Almost out of ammunition, two American planes carried on an uneven fight with the enemy to the north of the town. Another seven American fighters endeavoured to take off, eager to close with the enemy, but not one managed to reach more than 1000 feet. Enemy Zero fighters, with the advantage of height, picked them off as they struggled for altitude.

One American Major had reached only 250 feet when he was forced to bail out. He was too close to the ground for his parachute to open and was killed instantly. Four of the American pilots lost their lives in the vain attempt to get into the air and fight.

Once all Allied air resistance was crushed, the enemy had the harbour at their mercy. The militia anti-aircraft gunners stood to their guns, and crews which had never done a shoot with full charge ammunition before got away as many as 100 rounds in the crowded 50 minutes of the first raid. The bravery and devotion to duty of those gunners has become legend.

All around the harbour men fought back at the enemy with their light automatic machine-guns. The U.S. destroyer *Peary* struggled to free her moorings as her gunners engaged the enemy aircraft, while two Australian corvettes steamed back and forth around the harbour, zig-zagging to upset the aim of the dive bombers. One by one the dive bombers picked off the ships in the harbour.

The first bomb to fall on Australia—a 1000-pounder—scored a direct hit on the wharf, killing 20 labourers. Together with near misses the blast cleft a section of the wharf right out of the water, cutting off the seaward portion from the land. Oil from a nearby punctured oil pipe drained into the sea. It caught fire and in addition to the two ships beside the wharf was soon blazing fiercely. One after another the remaining ships in the harbour were sunk. A dive bomber would select its target, come right down to mast height and release its bombs, which struck home in a sheet of flame. Burning oil from an oil tanker spread over the water of the harbour, adding to the holocaust. Men drowned because they could not swim in the heavy oil. Men burnt because they could not escape the flames.

As soon as the dive bombers had dropped one load on the doomed ships, they circled above the town, machine-gunning as they went, to gain height for another attack... and another, until at last their bombs were exhausted.

With her guns blazing, the *Peary* fought an uneven battle. A bomb caught her on the stern, and flames shot up immediately. Gallantly she carried on, still firing while drifting around the harbour sinking by the stern. One last glimpse of her revealed the silhouette of an anti-aircraft gun on the foredeck with the head and shoulders of the American manning it standing out behind the shield, still firing stubbornly while the water lapped around the base of the gun. When the *Peary* went at last, she sank with two-thirds of her complement.

The hospital ship *Manunda* was hit by a bomb and suffered a near miss, but it was probable the bombs were intended for the still fighting *Peary* drifting past close by.

For 50 minutes the attack continued. In four of the ships of the ill-destined convoy which had returned the previous day was the full equipment of the troops disembarked that night. It was lost when the transports were sent to the bottom along with most of the other ships in the harbour.

Dive bombers also concentrated on the nearby civil airport and R.A.A.F. aerodrome.
This anti-aircraft gun and crew at Darwin have accounted for several Japanese planes. The gun is one of a battery which has been particularly successful during raids on Darwin and surrounding country.
Hangars were dive-bombed and went up in flames, while Zero fighters flew back and forth at only 50 feet, machine-gunning the big R.A.A.F. station. One R.A.A.F. wing commander manned a Lewis gun on top of his slit trench in defiance of the enemy, but was killed by a cannon shell. Other brave men died in like fashion that day in Darwin.

It was 10 a.m. when the first bomb fell on Darwin and the raid continued until about 10.50. When at last the skies cleared a stunned town had a short respite. Alongside the wharf a ship was burning fiercely and flames were licking from the blazing oil on the waters of the harbour. Not long after the departure of the last Japanese bomber the ship blew up with a terrific explosion which shook every house in the town. Pieces of debris hurtled hundreds of feet into the air. Any man on board who had survived the bombing perished immediately.

Men were trapped on the end of the pier surrounded by the flames from the burning ships and the oil-laden water. Many had dived desperately into the blazing oil in an attempt to escape the terrific heat, but most perished almost immediately. The fate of the remainder was sealed by the explosion.

This cockatoo, known to all troops in the Darwin area, flies around an anti-aircraft post during air raids shouting “Get under the sink, Harry,” to its owner.
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Under a pall of smoke from the burning harbour the town took stock of the damage. People emerged from their air-raid shelters, numbed and bewildered by the suddenness and intensity of the attack. Along the foreshore the post office and the police station were among the buildings reduced to rubble. There were many craters pitting the area overlooking the jetty, but most of the damage had been inflicted on the harbour, its installations and the ships that were sheltering within the boom.

There were some civilian casualties, including women. The harbour suffered most and provided nearly all the death roll. After the first raid a few civilians left the town and headed south along the overland road. Most remained and were still in the town when the alarm was again sounded at noon.

Flying in over the area from opposite directions and at a great height, two formations each of 27 Japanese bombers bombed what remained of the installations at the R.A.A.F. aerodrome. Hangars and other installations were still burning fiercely from the first raid.

The Japanese suffered some losses in the two raids, successes being scored by the gallant anti-aircraft gunners and the doomed fighter pilots. Two Japanese bombers were shot down, three Zero fighters shared the same fate and there were five “probables” which were not likely to return to their base or aircraft carrier. One of the dive bombers shot down received a direct hit while flying over the harbour at low level. There was an explosion and the machine just disintegrated in mid-air. It was impossible to determine who scored the hit.

And so the night of February 19 descended on Darwin. All night sailors and others were drifting up from the foreshore seeking the hospital where doctors toiled manfully in an effort to handle all their patients . . . men in bloodstained bandages, some clad only in pyjamas, some still carrying life jackets, some nursing terrible burns.

In the days that followed Australians and Americans toiled side by side to ensure that the tables would be turned should the air fleets of Nippon again venture over our northern shores.

Two weeks elapsed before enemy planes were again over Darwin. Eight Zero fighters appeared on March 4 and machine-gunned and cannoned aerodrome installations and the town itself. On March 16, 14 heavy bombers dropped 100 anti-personnel bombs on the Darwin area and followed this up on March 19 with 60 bombs of all sizes dropped by seven heavy bombers. Apart from anti-aircraft fire, no opposition was offered the enemy during these raids. However the anti-aircraft fire was forcing him higher and higher until he never approached at less than 20,000 feet.

While these sporadic raids continued, strenuous efforts had been made to prepare the way for a strong American fighter force to take up the struggle in the area. Constructional work was pushed through with great speed by American engineers. Meanwhile American fighter aircraft were beginning to arrive in Australia in greater numbers. With the hard spade work completed, Kittyhawk fighters took the air over Darwin on March 22 and shot down one of three enemy Zeros which paid the garrison a visit, probably on reconnaissance. It was the beginning of the end of enemy air superiority over Darwin. Thereafter Japanese bombers and fighters lost more and more heavily with each raid and were forced higher and higher.

On Anzac Day (April 25) 24 Japanese bombers and nine fighters were over. Of
these 11 were shot down with a twelfth registered as a probable. Two days later 26 machines paid a visit and seven remained.

A maze of figures could be quoted of raid numbers, enemy aircraft lost, their types, our small losses and anti-aircraft successes, but they all add up to one result. The Allies now hold overwhelming air superiority over Darwin.

While the American fighter pilots were defending Darwin, Australian bomber pilots carried the war to the Japanese in Timor and other islands. Unescorted by fighters, their attacks were very different from those of the Japanese, inasmuch as they were made at daringly low levels. On one occasion an Australian pilot diving on a ship just cleared his target at mast height. His bombs fell down the funnel of the ship, sinking it immediately. But so low was the Australian bomber that the blast of the bursting bombs destroyed it also.

And so the battle of Darwin progressed through the pleasant sunny months of the dry season. Each day the sun rose upon a Darwin utterly foreign to the town it had known for so long. The long, macadamized streets, lined with buildings characterized by iron roofs, fibro-cement, and high supports, were peopled only by a few men in uniform going quietly about their duty.