Earlier this year, an article was published in the News Bulletin (February 2012) on the background of Captain Boyns Hedley Hocking, a dentist who became one of the first casualties in the bombing of Darwin in 1942. The author, W F Mitchell, has kindly provided a summary of the 70th anniversary activities held in Darwin in February 2012 to commemorate this significant event in the Northern Territory’s history.

DARWIN BOMBING

On 19 February 1942, Darwin was bombed in the first attack by an enemy against the Australian mainland. That raid has long been recognised by Territorians as a significant event in their history. Each year, on the anniversary, the city pauses to remember the moment war came to our shores, the loss of life, and the destruction with a gathering of those who experienced the bombing, their descendants, relatives, friends and others in simple ceremonies of commemoration at the cenotaph and other venues.

The last few years have seen a surge of interest in the history of Australia and, in particular, its military history. In Darwin some of the stories – the amusing ones – will remain. However, with the passage of time re-examination and re-evaluation have focussed the colder light of evidence rather than anecdote upon the events of this day, dispelled many cherished myths long held as verities and brought the devastation of the morning into clearer perspective.

The Commonwealth government has finally accepted that this, the first of a number of raids against our mainland, was a defining moment not only in the history of the city itself but also in the nation as a whole. It has now legislated to ensure that knowledge of the raids is passed on to future generations through the school history curriculum, and that the date is included in a calendar of remembrance.

70TH ANNIVERSARY BECOMES A TURNING POINT

Darwin has long recognised the attack as a tragedy that extended far beyond our shores. People from other nations, principally the United States, were here also. Largely forgotten is that the only opposition in the air came from a flight of ten United States Army Air Corps (USAAC) Kittyhawks, in transit to Java but forced back by bad weather en route to Darwin, to battle and to death – nine were destroyed and four of the pilots killed. In Darwin harbour the American destroyer, USS Peary, her guns firing to the end, was sunk and some 90 of her crew lost. They too are part of the city’s remembrance.

Realisation that as the years must inevitably take their toll and the future will see fewer of the survivors hale and hearty enough to travel, this was the last opportunity we were to be given to call them, and as they gathered, to stand alongside them in Darwin, to remember and pay tribute to those, civilian and military, native and foreign, who lost their lives in the carnage of that morning. This prompted the decision by the government and the City Council to mark this as a special anniversary with a series of commemorative events, observances and activities, some traditional, some special to this anniversary, extending over a fortnight.
COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS

The Northern Territory State Library provided an excellent venue for a number of the events special to this anniversary — stories, seminars and discussions on the history of the times. In one, military historian Dr Tom Lewis OAM and Lieutenant Commander Eric Thompson, the still-sprightly 98-year-old, then gunnery officer of the corvette, HMAS Deloraine, discussed the times and the action off Darwin in which the Imperial Japanese Navy mine-laying submarine, I-124 was sunk with all crew on 20 January 1942. She remains on the sea bed near Darwin, a war grave for Lieutenant Commander Kishigami and his crew.

The staff of the Library researched the lives and prepared short biographies of more than 200 of those who died on 19 February 1942 to present them as an on-line Roll of Honour. The premiere of the somewhat disturbing film An Awkward Truth was screened to a packed audience of veterans and others. Secondary school students mounted an art exhibition and local historians, Peter and Sheila Forrest, brought out a social history of the wartime Territory. The interactive ‘Defence of Darwin Experience’ was opened in the Military Museum area at East Point.

This year a large contingent of those who served in and around Darwin during the war years returned. The Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott also came for this Commemoration as did the ambassadors of the United States and Japan. Japan’s daily newspaper, The Yomiuri Shimbun, sent its bureau chief from Jakarta to report the events.

As in past years there were specific commemorations — for those of the United States Navy, at the USS Peary Memorial on The Esplanade — one of her guns pointing to the spot where she lies — and for waterside workers at the wharf. Central to all, remains the commemoration at the Cenetaph where, in re-enactment, at 9.58 am the chilling sounds of a wailing siren take one back in time to those first few, terrifying minutes when the bombs fell and anti-aircraft guns barked their response. It introduced a simple ceremony led by the Lord Mayor, and this year graced by the presence of the Governor General Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC CVO. Future commemorations will be far more subdued as the baton must now pass from the makers of the history to its inheritors.

Thus the 70th anniversary becomes a turning point. The passage of the years has probably clouded realisation that a number of the streets around the city and suburbs recall the names of ships and people lost — Mauna Loa Street, Meigs Crescent, and, of course, Manunda Terrace, significant for us as dentists.

ADA INVOLVEMENT IN COMMEMORATION

The Australian Dental Association played its part in the commemoration. The NT Branch arranged for an IGLS continuing education day and a general meeting to bring members together on Saturday, 18 February. The agenda for the meeting drew attention to Captain Boyns Hocking, the dental officer who was among 12 killed when the Hospital Ship, Manunda, was bombed.

Few, even among our dentists, could direct visitors to any of four large bronze plaques placed around the city. Three of the plaques — one outside Government House, where the flag remained flying, in defiance of the efforts of attacking machine gunners; one in the Mall, where for many years scars on the façade of the Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac) bore witness to the strafing; and one on the wharf, where 22 waterside workers were among the first casualties — graphically relate the story of the bombing and record the destruction and death. The fourth — near the Cenetaph — is a chilling reminder of the loss of the ill-fated Gull Force, rushed from Darwin to Ambon, and the fate of those taken prisoner there.

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