David Tollner
Minister for Lands and Planning

Darwin Harbour’s sunken US seaplanes preserved for posterity

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The wrecks of three US Catalina flying boats sunk in the first Japanese bombing raid on Darwin in 1942 are to be permanently protected by the Northern Territory Government.

Minister for Lands and Planning David Tollner has declared the wrecks ‘heritage places’, making it an offence to damage or remove items from the aircraft.

“The bombing of Darwin was one of the most important and dramatic events in the history of the Territory and the whole nation,” Minister Tollner said.

“Many Australians died in the raids, but we should not lose sight of the sacrifices that were also made by our American allies here in the Territory.

“Australians and Americans fought and died together in the defence of freedom and the wrecks of these three aircraft are a lasting memorial to those brave men and women.

“Defence is woven into our history and the Territory Government is determined to protect that heritage and increase the public’s awareness of it.”

The three US Navy Catalinas were all sunk at their moorings in Darwin Harbour’s East Arm when more than 240 Japanese aircraft attacked on 19 February 1942. The seaplanes’ crews were not on board at the time.

Three warships were sunk in the attack, as well as a number of merchant vessels.

Although historians disagree on the number of people who died in the raids, at least 243 Allied servicemen and civilians were killed.

Darwin had become a major base for both the Australian and US military as Japanese forces rampaged across South East Asia following the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941.

The wrecks were protected following a recommendation by the Heritage Council.

The US Navy backed the application, saying the heritage listing would “highlight the joint effort and sacrifices made by both Australian and United States servicemen and citizens in the protection of Australia and the Greater Pacific”. 
The heritage listing, which was also supported by INPEX and the Port of Darwin Corporation, means anyone who knowingly harms the wrecks could be fined up to $59,000 or jailed for two years.

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