The attack that stopped the footy

“That was a very disastrous day when we had to knock off playing football because the Japs came and bombed Darwin,” recalls Gabe Hazlebene. Gabe was about sixteen and playing football for the local Buffaloes team when the threat of an attack on Darwin stopped the Northern Territory Football League (NTFL).

His is a story about Darwin, football and World War Two.

Gabe is looking at a photo of the Buffaloes Football team from 1939-40. For him it holds a lot of this history.

A wall to remember

There was no other city in Australia impacted as Darwin was in World War Two.

The bombing attacks, evacuations and military presence changed this city forever. For many locals it was a time of great loss and hardship.

City of Darwin has taken the opportunity of the 75th Anniversary of the Bombing of Darwin to pay tribute to these locals.

Fourteen years ago a Civilian Memorial Wall was built near The Cenotaph on The Esplanade. Last week, in time for the Anniversary events, 44 new plaques were added. There are now 116 plaques, each with a personal tale of adversity, with family names proudly engraved into the city’s memory.

Many of the families represented on the Wall are ‘old Darwin families’, whose women and children were evacuated, returning around 1947.

Ernie Chin has put a plaque for his father Chin Loong Pak. “I wanted a plaque because our mob – the Chin family – have been in Darwin since around 1889. My dad built a place on Cavenagh Street. He had just finished building when the bombs hit it. The shrapnel marks are still on the walls.”

John Cubilllo’s family have had a plaque done in remembrance, for the generations to come. John Cubilllo went to work on the wharf on that fateful morning of 19 February 1942. He died when the ship he was working on took a direct hit from the first bombs. His family had been evacuated and were in Katherine when they found out he had died.

Behind every plaque is a personal/poignant story.

City of Darwin’s Lord Mayor Katrina Fong Lim urges the community to take the time to visit Darwin’s Civilian Memorial Wall and pay tribute to these locals and recognise the vital role of civilians during World War Two and the Bombing of Darwin.

“The Bombing of Darwin was a defining moment in Australia’s history. The Civilian Memorial Wall enables our community and visitors to reflect and pay tribute to those civilians who were affected. I am pleased City of Darwin was able to subsidise the cost of the new plaques as a small gesture of respect to those affected,” said the Lord Mayor.

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The Japanese attacks may have officially stopped the NTFL in 1942 – but the game was being played more than ever in Darwin.

Gabe remembers that there was nothing else much to do in your spare time other than play football. On the weekends the teams would get trucked around to play each other – Pine Creek, Adelaide River, and Katherine. For the first time Australian Rules was also being played in Alice Springs. The military units created new ovals all over the place.

The military build-up in Darwin before the war meant that the 1939-40 NTFL season had new military teams such as Mobile Force and Air Force. The newly formed military teams often included some crack players from other states, giving the NTFL a real boost. The crowds would come to watch the games at the Esplanade Oval (which was under military control) – despite access to the grandstand being prohibited.

Hotel in the Background (NTRS)

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