

WARTIME SNAPSHOTS



70th anniversary of the bombing of Darwin

On 19 February 1942, Japanese aircraft bombed Darwin, killing hundreds of service personnel and civilians. This was the first of a series of almost 100 Japanese aerial attacks on Australia, ending in November 1943. Australian War Memorial 134955



Background

Before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Darwin was a sleepy, tropical town. It had, however, been identified as an area of some importance for the defence of Australia when a decision was made in the late 1930s to increase navy and army presence there.

On 7 December 1941, when Japan entered the war against Australia and its allies, there were about 15,000 Australian and Allied personnel living in Darwin and the immediate surrounding areas. The air and naval defences of the region were not strong and Darwin's defenders were not prepared for the devastating air raids mounted on the town, its port and airfields, on 19 February 1942. These raids resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people and the widespread destruction of the town, port and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) station.

In the months following these air raids, the Japanese launched almost 100 raids across the north of Australia. With the exception of the raid on Broome on 3 March 1942, these did not come close to equalling the ferocity and destruction of the initial raids. They did highlight to the Australian authorities the vulnerability of Australia's north.

As a result, the defences were rapidly expanded. Australian, British, Dutch and US fighter squadrons and warships were deployed to Darwin and other parts of the north, while Australian and US bomber squadrons began flying from bases around Darwin and other places in Australia's north to engage the enemy.

The threat of attack on Australian soil decreased with the success of Australian and Allied campaigns against the Japanese in New Guinea, Asia and the Pacific. The defences in Darwin were then reduced, but not completely removed, until after the war ended in August 1945.

Due to distance and government censorship, detailed information about the bombing of Darwin did not reach all parts of Australia. Many Australians were not aware of the bombing or the loss of lives.

References

- G. Hermon Gill, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945: Royal Australian Navy 1942–1945*, Series 2, Navy, Vol. II, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1968.
- Douglas Gillison, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945: Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, Series 3, Air Force, Vol. 1, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962.
- Dudley McCarthy, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945: South-West Pacific Area – The First Year*, Series 1, Army, Vol. V, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1959.
- Peter Stanley, *Invading Australia: Japan and the Battle for Australia, 1942*, Viking, 2008.
- Bob Wurth, *1942: Australia's Greatest Peril*, Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2008.

Websites

Department of Veterans' Affairs

- Australia under attack (Question 5, 8 and 9) www.wv2australia.gov.au/underattack/airraid.html

Australian War Memorial (AWM)

- Background information (Question 5) www.awm.gov.au/units/event_59.asp
- Four images of bombing (Question 3) www.awm.gov.au/atwar/remembering1942/darwin/photos.asp
- Artwork: *Darwin, 19 February 1942* (Question 4) cas.awm.gov.au/item/ART28520
- Response to the attacks (Question 8) www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/underattack/underattack.asp
- Information and map (Question 5 and 8) www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/underattack/bombed/
- Citations for bravery (Question 8) www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/underattack/bombed/bravery.asp
- Prime Minister's response (Question 8 and 9) www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/underattack/bombed/curtin.asp

National Archives of Australia

- Australia under attack (Question 5, 6,7,8 and 9) www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs195.aspx

National Library of Australia

- Background information (Question 6,7 and 8) nationaltreasures.nla.gov.au/%3E/Treasures/item/nla.int-ex10-s8/nla.int-ex10-s9

Darwin City Council

- Commemorative website www.frontlineaustralia.com.au

Teaching Activities

Use the poster, background information and websites listed above, to answer the following questions:

1. Examine the image on the bombing of Darwin Anzac Day poster. What is happening in the photograph?
2. The photograph alone cannot provide all the facts about the events of 19 February 1942. What information is missing? List five dot points.
3. Compare the poster with the four images (two paintings and two photos) of the bombing from the AWM website. What more can you learn about the Japanese attack from these images? List two things for each image.
4. Look closely at the second image *Darwin, 19 February 1942* (ART28520) painted by Ray Honisett and the accompanying background information. Do you think this painting is an accurate depiction of the event? Explain your answer.
5. Create a timeline of the Japanese air attacks on Australia from 19 February 1942 – 12 November 1943. Where possible, include a short description of the location, number of casualties and destruction caused.
6. What were the Japanese hoping to achieve by attacking Australia in 1942?
7. Was Australia in danger of invasion by the Japanese? Explain your answer.
8. List the different ways the Australian people responded to the attacks?
9. The Australian Government at the time tried to censor information about the attacks. Why was this?
10. You are living in Darwin in 1942, on the day the first attack occurred. Write a one page letter to your friend in Melbourne about what you experienced that day. Make sure to discuss your thoughts on Australia's future security.
11. In groups, imagine you are members of the Darwin City Council tasked with the job of organising an event to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Darwin.
 - (a) Decide the best way to commemorate the event and develop a plan to make it happen.
 - (b) Organise your information into a report or poster to present to the rest of the class. Make sure you consider why you are commemorating this event, the best way to get your message across, the location, who will be invited to the event and what resources (e.g. staff and finances) you would need.

