

Afternoon Tea for the
Veterans serving in Darwin during World War II
SPEECH by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling AO QC
Administrator of the Northern Territory
Government House – 18 February 2009

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Government House. I acknowledge the Larrakia people and their ancestors, traditional owners of the land on which this house stands.

Memories bring us here today. Memories of those who did not come back from behind enemy lines in Timor, Ambon, and many land and sea resting places to our north. Memories of mateship shared amongst comrades who saw service here in the Top End and experienced first hand the aggression inflicted upon Australia's home front.

Government House Darwin is, for the term of my position as The Administrator of the Northern Territory, my home. This house and gardens suffered during the extensive bombing of Darwin, my predecessor, Charles Lydiard Aubrey Abbott and his wife Hilda were here at the time.

Abbott had served in the army with distinction at Gallipoli. He was appointed Administrator in 1937 with an initial task to oversee reconstruction following the severe cyclone earlier that year. Although almost his entire period as Administrator was a contentious time, the Abbotts' recollections of 19th February 1942 ensure the scenes that unfolded on that day remain vivid for us all.

Mrs Abbott had just finished her phone calls, tracking down the few food supplies that were available. She was President of the Australian Red Cross Northern Territory Division and was preparing to go across to their depot behind the Town Hall. Mr Abbott was busy in his office.

At 9.46am a fog horn sounded the alert from the roof of the Navy headquarters across the road, which is now my office. This was immediately followed by the dreaded rumble of 188 aircraft approaching, the sudden outburst of anti-aircraft guns, the impact of the first bombs and then, belatedly, the wail of the air raid sirens.

Bombs hit the wharf and burning oil and smoke began to spread out across the water. Then there was a devastating direct hit on the Post Office shelter, telephone exchange and cable office.

The Abbots and their staff had taken shelter in the room below his office. Unfortunately a bomb landed between this building and an adjacent garage. Reinforced concrete pillars collapsed and the little laundress, 18-year-old Daisy Martin was killed. A memorial plaque commemorating her death is displayed in our gardens. All that had saved the entire party from death was the steel door of the strong room.

The many vessels in Darwin Harbour were under attack and began their anti-aircraft barrage. There was a massive explosion and USS Peary began to sink. There was the noise of a fire getting hold on the Neptuna at the wharf with tragic results – the blast from the ordinance on board resounded up this hillside and was heard miles away.

Government House and gardens were strafed by enemy bullets. Administrator Abbott's pride and joy, his Buick Utility, sustained minor damage. And the Australian blue ensign that was flying from the flagstaff on the front lawn also drew enemy fire. Now an exhibit at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, this flag continues to bear testament to the Bombing of Darwin.

One of my first official duties was a visit to the War Memorial. I was surprised to be met by the Director himself, a very busy man. After the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier and the impressive Hall of Memory with its thousands of poppies, we headed downstairs. The Director suddenly said *we got it legitimately you know; while we could lend it to you, it is quite fragile.* I was nonplussed. He thought that I had come to seize the flag – and he intended to protect it!

I began this afternoon by saying that memories have brought us here today and, indeed, they will again tomorrow at the cenotaph.

The word “memory” means “to be mindful”. We, here in the Northern Territory, are certainly mindful and also immensely grateful for your service sixty-seven years ago. It gives me great pleasure to meet you all personally and I sincerely hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in Darwin.