

Commemorative Service
67th Anniversary of the Bombing of Darwin
SPEECH by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling QC
Administrator of the Northern Territory

Cenotaph, The Esplanade, Darwin – 19 February 2009 10am

Distinguished guests, veterans.

Sixty-seven years ago, following the occupation of Rabaul on 23 January 1942 and the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, there began a series of sixty-four bombing raids targeted by the Imperial Japanese Forces on Darwin and the Top End.

The raids continued for almost two years, causing many military and civilian fatalities. Destruction of infrastructure and property was coupled with devastation suffered by Territory families. Yet Newspoll research, commissioned by Tourism NT last year, indicated that many Australians had no idea of the importance of Darwin's defence role in World War II. Cinema audiences who enjoyed the movie *Australia* may now be better informed, at

least of the fact that Darwin was in the front line. But in real life the effect on real people here was profound. Their stories are our history.

It was on this day that the first two Australians to be decorated for bravery in action on the soil of the Australian mainland were under fire. Military Medals were subsequently awarded to Sergeant Frederick Wombey and Gunner Wilbert Hudson of the 14th Australian Heavy Anti-aircraft Battery.

Sergeant Wombey (then a Lance Bombadier) was manning an anti-aircraft light machine position. He ordered his gun crew to safety as he himself stood his ground, firing continuously as the position was attacked.

Gunner Hudson, known as (Darky), was a member of Berrimah Section who shot down a Japanese Zero aircraft near Kormilda. In the urgency of the moment, he was not correctly dressed. Four months later, on 16 June 1942, he was one of five men burnt whilst defending the naval oil storage

tanks, becoming known as one of the "Burns Boys" who were saved thanks to outstanding nursing care. I know Darky's mates are here with us today.

The nurses who served in the Northern Territory worked aboard hospital ships, such as HMAHS *Manunda*. It was aboard *Manunda* that Sister Margaret de Mestre of Bellingen was killed by the second bomb that hit the ship in that first raid on 19 February 1942.

The dedicated nurses cared for the wounded in canvas and corrugated iron temporary hospitals from Darwin to Katherine, Batchelor, Adelaide River and Alice Springs. The *Manunda*, herself, despite damage, left Darwin the next day and reached Fremantle with many wounded.

Across the nation, St John-accredited instructors equipped as many of the public as possible with basic medical skills that might save lives and spare suffering if the bombing escalated further.

Another name as well known as St John is Qantas. They too were directly affected by the Bombing of Darwin. The Qantas Story *...from the dawn of aviation* recounts the tale of Captain Aubrey Koch, their first casualty.

Captain Koch was flying RMA *Corio* from Darwin to Surabaya to evacuate refugees when he was shot down. He was one of the five on board who survived. However, recovering in hospital in Darwin after his rescue from Timor, Koch found himself once more under fire. Subsequently, he was amongst those on the first flying boat into Sydney from Darwin following the air attacks.

The Qantas story relates: *as Darwin was being raided by 188 carrier fighters and bombers from the same strike force that had devastated Pearl Harbour, 54 more land-based bombers from Ambon joined them. The assault sank nine ships, damaged thirteen others ... the Qantas hangar was*

destroyed, as was the flying boat jetty. Two Catalinas on moorings were sunk.....

These words describe the mayhem evident all around what is, for us, a peaceful scene.

Let us therefore, today, not only remember those lost in the Bombing of Darwin in 1942, but also hold close to our hearts thoughts of all current members of our Australian Defence force.

I would like to share some words from newspaper reports last month:

The fallen Digger was a man of purpose and committed determination; a quiet achiever who always got the job done and would do anything for anyone; his decision to serve the nation was a true indication of his character; he always wanted to help and be of assistance; he understood the risks but willingly did what was asked of him. He is truly an Australian hero.

We mourn with the family of this particular Aussie Digger - Private Gregory Sher - who was killed in the rocket attack in southern Afghanistan on 4th January 2009. And from the bottom of our hearts we extend our gratitude to all who have fought for and continue to fight for our country.