

Speech by Mayor Logan K Howlett, JP
Attack on Australia - "The Bombing of Darwin"
Memorial Service
City of Cockburn RSL Sub- Branch
Rose Garden
Wednesday 19 February 2020

Good morning distinguished guests, Veterans, the serving men and women of the Australian Defence Force, ladies and gentlemen.

The Cockburn RSL Sub Branch's initiative in organising today's memorial service as we reflect on the Bombing of Darwin on the 19th February 1942, the first and the largest single attack mounted by a foreign power against Australia is to be commended.

The Service compliments a memorial ceremony held on this day at the Cenotaph in Darwin when at 9:58 am, a WWII Air Raid Siren sounds to mark the precise time of the first attack by the Japanese Imperial Forces on what was then a very small town.

In 2013, an impressive memorial was unveiled in Darwin to honour those who were killed and wounded on that day.

The memorial stands as a permanent reminder to all who visit Darwin, a City that has been rebuilt on two occasions – the first as a result of the bombing in 1942 – the second as a result of Cyclone Tracy in 1974.

Ironically, Darwin is one of Australia's most modern cities as a result of these two events.

It is a day that will be longed remembered by those present and from the stories they have passed down through the generations to family and friends.

The event has also been researched by several eminent war historians who each have given different scenarios of what actually happened, who was at fault, and how many were actually killed or wounded.

How communications, technology and weaponry have changed since that fateful day when the Japanese force was spotted by an Australian coastwatcher on Melville Island.

While the coastwatcher radioed a warning to the authorities in Darwin, RAAF officers there wrongly judged that the aircraft which had been sighted were actually the ten

USAAC P-40s, which were returning to Darwin at the time after bad weather forced them to abort a flight to Timor.

As a result, the air raid sirens at Darwin were not sounded.

This resulted in what has been described as the unnecessary loss of life and injuries to both civilians and service men and women.

Important harbour infrastructure was also damaged, as were ships and aircraft and a good part of the Darwin township.

Unlike events occurring today where someone is always there with an I-Phone recording it to send around the world in a matter of seconds there was no such direct communication to alert Australians of what had just occurred.

Strategically, the Australian Government didn't want the general populous to lose confidence in the war effort and they therefore 'controlled' what was released, unlike the world of today where information is available as it happens - no matter what the event.

However, even with the communication technology available today we can still receive mixed messages – often those message are left to us to decipher – conflicting reports leave us with conversations that start with the words; Well who is telling the truth – that question and many others remain unanswered in a world flooded with media hype.

In hindsight, Australia did well to recover from the attack on Darwin – strengthening its military capacity in terms of weaponry, forces on the ground and increased attention to 'intelligence' as to the movements of the enemy.

It demonstrates that we have to be eternally vigilant to ensure that events that occurred in Darwin, Sydney and around our coast in times of war are not repeated.

Today Darwin still stands as Australia's northernmost City, its people ever alert to their proximity to Asia and the increasing tension for control of the maritime corridors.

With a population of just over 120,000 Darwin remains a strategic centre in terms of its proximity to Asia and Australia's defence capacity and responsiveness.

While people go about their daily activities today we must be cognisant of events that occurred in the past and while the episodes of the Bombing of Darwin will never be forgotten, people's minds have turned to trade, tourism and the adventures that reflect the remoteness of the region.

It is interesting how people and communities move on from acts of war and aggression and how peace seems just beyond our reach – ever so close – but just beyond our reach.

Lest We Forget!