

# Broome under fire in Pacific's forgotten disaster

**Michael O'Connor**

## **Zero Hour in Broome**

By Tom Lewis  
and Peter Ingram  
Avonmore Books,  
184pp, \$44.95

**O**N March 3, 1942, less than two weeks after the first devastating air raids on Darwin, a force of nine Japanese Zero fighters attacked the port and airfield at Broome. By coincidence, a collection of 15 Australian, Dutch, British and American flying boats evacuated from Java were on the water in the port area.

With unloading difficult because of a shortage of small boats and the large tidal range, a number still contained their passengers and crew. All 15 were destroyed, with 58 men, women and children killed.

At Broome airfield, seven civil and military aircraft, including four American heavy bombers, were attacked. One American Liberator bomber with 21 people, mostly wounded, on board, managed to take off but was shot down, although it did return fire on its attacker, the only Japanese casualty of the raid. There was only one survivor.

During their return flight to Timor, the Zeros intercepted a Dutch civil DC-3 north of Broome and shot it down, with four passengers killed before the aircraft made a forced landing on the beach. One Zero ran out of fuel short of its base and ditched in the Timor Sea but the pilot was recovered.

*Zero Hour in Broome* paints a picture of strategic disaster. Java had been invaded by the Japanese on March 1 and the Dutch and US authorities were hastening to evacuate key personnel, some civilians, and aircraft that were no longer of operational value.

Broome was the nearest Allied airfield but lacked fighters and anti-aircraft defences.

The Japanese raid was seemingly intended for little more than its nuisance value, although their long-range reconnaissance would have revealed Broome's use as an evacuation staging post.

The authors are critical of the lack of defence preparedness at Broome and scathing of the lack of direction and control by the various civil and military organisations.

To be fair, the whole Allied situation in Southeast Asia was chaotic as military forces and governments struggled to cope with the physical and psychological pressures of the Japanese drive south. The panic that infected

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some elements of the Australian government is shown by an extract from Melbourne's *The Age* of March 4.

This book deliberately has a narrow focus. The attacks on Broome and other towns in the north of Western Australia had neither strategic value nor impact.

As was known soon afterwards, Japan had no intention of invading Australia but may have been more concerned to delay any development of Allied bases and attack targets of opportunity.

The authors have gathered a wealth of information and produced it in a small but handsome volume of World War II history.

It is extensively illustrated with photographs, colour images and descriptions of the various types of aircraft, Allied and Japanese, that feature in the story.

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