

Introduction

For most of 1942 the entire air defence of northern Australia was operated by airmen from the United States.

That year was very nearly the end of Australia as a country. To those men the present nation owes a great debt.

For most of the year P-40 fighters of the United States Army Air Force bravely took on large formations of Imperial Japanese Navy Betty bombers and their Zero escorts. It was a life and death struggle for which the P-40 was ill-suited: it was never designed as an interceptor and had poor performance at high altitude. It was in these machines that inexperienced young American flyers pitted themselves against battle-hardened Japanese adversaries in their feared Zero fighters.

This is their story.

Young Americans had been fighting and dying in northern Australia since the early days of the Pacific War. The first to fall was Lieutenant Robert Buel. He died in his P-40 on 15 February 1942, in combat against a Japanese flying boat north of Darwin. A lonely sign marks his end, placed on Darwin's Esplanade near a gun from the destroyer *USS Peary*, sunk nearby by Japanese dive-bombers with the loss of 88 lives. It is about time something significant was named after Buel, as his death marked the beginning of a shared Australian-American wartime experience that underpins the strength of the present-day alliance between the two nations.

Major Floyd Pell died in combat four days later, leading his nine men against a massive air armada of 188 carrier aircraft intent on bombing Darwin. This they did with impunity, leaving Pell's P-40s (all except one), smoking wrecks scattered around the northern Australia capital. Pell had a wartime airfield named after him, but it is all but forgotten now except as a historical site on tourist maps. However, Pell's sacrifice was indicative of American intent in the early days of the war. They were here to fight, and if they could not win in those grim times, their faith in ultimate victory was unshakeable.

The days of February 1942 were dark indeed for Australians. Just four days before the bombing of Darwin the British fortress of Singapore had surrendered. Seen as impregnable, the fall of Singapore left Australian defence policy in tatters and the nation without a single modern fighter plane with which to defend its home territory. With Britain busy fighting for its own survival, Australia turned to America. It was the beginning of what is today known as "The Alliance" and it started in Darwin.

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