

Bombing of Darwin taught us to fear

Ross Fitzgerald

Carrier Attack: Darwin 1942

By Tom Lewis and Peter Ingman
Avonmore Books, 368pp, \$49.99 (HB)

THE surprise air attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, was unforgettably described by then US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt as "a day of infamy". A few weeks later we had a similar brush with infamy. On the morning of February 19, 1942, four days after the surrender of Singapore, 242 Japanese aircraft savagely bombed the isolated, lightly defended port of Darwin and its two airfields, especially targeting more than 60 Allied ships in the harbour. This concerted air attack, which involved the deployment of four Japanese aircraft carriers, was "Australia's own Pearl Harbor", write Tom Lewis and Peter Ingman in *Carrier Attack: Darwin 1942*.

In this superbly researched book, the authors point out that a number of the pilots who had bombed Pearl Harbor were pivotal in the raid on Darwin. Chief among them was commander Mitsuo Fuchida, who led the Pearl Harbor assault. In contrast to the 2335 American and other Allied men and women who died at Pearl Harbor, the Darwin attack resulted in the loss of

an estimated 235 lives, both civilian and military and including more than 100 Americans.

It is important to remember that in World War I Japan had been an ally of the countries that fought against Germany. In particular, Japan's navy — trained and modelled on the Royal Navy — had escorted Allied ships to Europe. Yet in a little more than 20 years, Japan was fighting against its former friends.

Lewis and Ingman have drawn on newly translated Japanese documents — including the Japanese Official War History — and on almost 1000 pages of transcripts of evidence to the royal commission into the bombing of Darwin. As a result, the authors of this detailed book have come as close as is humanly possible to telling the complete story of what happened on that fateful February morning in 1942.

Australian anti-aircraft gunner Jack Mulholland, who was with the 3.7 inch guns at Darwin Oval directly overlooking the harbour, explained that there were so many Japanese aircraft "it was surprising they were able to avoid mid-air collisions". Mulholland, who died in 2012, had a perfect view of the action: "The sky seemed to be full of white crosses ... the enemy planes looked like a well-ordered cemetery advancing across a blue field."

The Japanese had excellent intelligence on Darwin and knew they would face feeble air op-

position, if any. Although the Catholic missionary in charge of Bathurst Island, John McGrath, had given Darwin advanced radio warning of an incoming Japanese air raid, for whatever reason this was not passed on. At least partly a result of this inaction, Japanese losses were extremely light: four aircraft, two deaths and one prisoner — who, on August 5, 1944, was eventually involved in the breakout of Japanese prisoners of war from a camp near Cowra, NSW.

Of all the Allied planes on the ground at Darwin's RAAF base only three Hudson bombers, dispersed under camouflage, escaped unscathed. However, there can be no doubt the primary target was the port of Darwin itself. Indeed the relevant section of the Japanese Official History is entitled "Destroying Port Darwin". The landmark event of the day was a massive explosion, resulting in an enormous mushroom cloud, that destroyed the Australian ship *Neptuna*, which held a critical cargo of ammunition including anti-aircraft shells.

As Lewis and Ingman explain, at the time of the first ferocious attack on Darwin, the actions of the local RAAF command were a "bloody shambles". For a variety of reasons, including a number of union strikes by local waterside workers, rank-and-file morale was low. As a result of the general confusion and panic, numerous Australians stationed in and around

Darwin abandoned their posts and fled. As was the case with Pearl Harbor, a few hours later the Japanese launched a second air raid. Although little more actual damage was done, the effect on morale was significant: "This contributed hugely to the further exodus of personnel that afternoon." Until February 19, 1942, most Australians believed war was something that happened far away. As Lewis and Ingman conclude: "The attack on Darwin was a sudden and violent affront to this idea, and came as a great shock to our young nation."

However, almost everyone in Australia misread Japanese intentions. Darwin was not attacked as a prelude to an invasion of Australia. Instead, Darwin represented a primary threat to the Japanese invasion of Timor, planned for February 20. In this respect the air raids were supremely successful.

Although the attack on Darwin was catastrophic, its main effect was on our sense of national vulnerability. It is hard to disagree with Lewis and Ingman that despite our involvement in actions of greater strategic consequence elsewhere, the raid on Darwin "had a peculiar effect on the Australian psyche that continues to the present day".

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