The Bombing of Darwin

ANZAC DAY the 25 April marks the anniversary of the first major military action fought by Australian and New Zealand forces during the First World War.

What does ANZAC stand for?

ANZAC stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.

The soldiers in this force quickly became known as ANZACs, and the pride they took in that name endures to this day.

When war broke out in 1914, Australia had only been an independent country for 13 years. The new national government was eager to establish its reputation among the nations of the world.

In 1915 Australian and New Zealand soldiers set out to capture the Gallipoli peninsula in the country that is now Turkey.

They wanted to help the allies eventually capture Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey), the capital of the Ottoman Empire, because the Turks were fighting alongside the Germans.

The Australian and New Zealand forces landed on Gallipoli on 25 April, meeting fierce resistance from the Ottoman Turkish defenders.

What had been planned as a bold way to quickly beat Turkey didn’t happen.

The battle became an eight month struggle in which over 8,000 Australian soldiers were killed before the ANZAC soldiers retreated in defeat.
News of the landing on Gallipoli and the deaths that followed made a profound impact on Australians at home, and 25 April soon became the day on which Australians remembered the sacrifice of those who had died in the war.

Different types of War memorials were built all around Australia to record the names of those who died.

Many of these monuments are cenotaphs.

A cenotaph is an "empty tomb" or a monument erected in honour of a person or group of people whose remains are elsewhere.

The word derives from the Greek: kenotaphion (kenos, one meaning being "empty", and taphos, "tomb").

World War 2

When World War 2 began, in 1939, Australian troops once again went to war.

This time to fight Adolph Hitler’s Nazi Germany which was invading other countries in Europe.

Australian troops initially fought against the Germans in Europe and North Africa.

On the morning of December 7, 1941 Japan attacked the United States of America by bombing its naval fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. America then entered World War 2.

An hour after the bombing of Pearl Harbor Australia’s Prime Minister, John Curtin, declared that...

“From one hour ago, Australia has been at war with the Japanese Empire.”

From this point on Japan, with whom we had been friends, was our enemy and the Pacific War had begun.

At this time about 5,200 people were living in Darwin.

Japan now began to invade as many countries as it could in the Pacific Area to increase its resources.
took over many countries including parts of China, Vietnam, Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies, which is now the country of Indonesia.

As Japanese troops spread from country to country and island to island they bombed their enemies ships and any ports where the ships could refuel and get supplies.

As Japan got ready to invade the island of Timor it was worried that warships and planes would be sent to stop it. Allied ships and aircraft were based in Darwin.

Japanese ships were continually being attacked by the allies to stop the Japanese advancing further.

There were a large number of Allied ships in Darwin Harbour on 19 February. In total, 45 Allied warships and merchant vessels.

The warships included the United States Navy destroyer USS Peary and seaplane tender William B. Preston.

The RAN ships in port were the sloop HMAS Swan, corvettes Deloraine and Katoomba, auxiliary minesweepers Gunbar and Tolga, patrol boat Coongoola, depot ship Platypus, examination vessel Southern Cross, lugger Mavie and four boom-net ships. Several USN and Australian troop ships were in the harbour along with a number of merchant vessels of varying sizes.

Most of the ships in the harbour were anchored near each other, making them an easy target for air attack.

The Japanese therefore decide to repeat what they had done at Pearl Harbor and do a sneak attack on Darwin on 19th February 1942.

Two attacks, were planned and led by the commander responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbour ten weeks earlier and involved 54 land-based bombers and approximately 188 attack aircraft which were launched from four Japanese aircraft-carriers in the Timor Sea.

About 45 minutes before the Japanese force arrived they were spotted by an Australian coastwatcher on Melville Island.

While the coastwatcher radioed a warning to the authorities at Darwin, RAAF officers wrongly thought that the aircraft which had been sighted were actually ten American P-40 fighters which they knew were returning to Darwin, at the time, after bad weather forced them to cancel a flight to Timor.

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

In the first attack, which began just before 10.00 am, heavy bombers pattern-bombed the harbour and town; dive bombers escorted by Zero fighters then attacked shipping in the harbour, the military and civil aerodromes, and the hospital at Berrimah.

The attack ceased after about 40 minutes.
The second attack, which began an hour later, involved high altitude bombing of the Royal Australian Air Force base at Parap which lasted for 20-25 minutes. The two raids killed at least 243 people and between 300 and 400 were wounded. Graves of civilian personnel killed during a Japanese air raid. The bodies were interred and the crosses erected by No 12 Mobile Laundry, Australian Army.

Even more people would have died except for the fact that in late December of 1941 most white and Asian women and children had been evacuated from the town.

Little thought seems to have been given to the large Aboriginal population. They were expected to fend for themselves.

Those white women who stayed, about 63, were for the most part employed in essential services, such as nursing and telegraphy.

Some civilians and organisations had dug slit trenches and there had been several trial air-raid alarms, but overall defenses were inadequate.

The attacks were not a preparation for an invasion of Australia, although at the time many people believed this.

The Japanese were just ensuring that when they invaded Timor there would be no disruptive air attacks from Darwin or the launch of a counter-offensive from it.

At the same time Japan wanted to damage Australian morale and make Australians feel scared and unsafe.

Damage caused by the raid.

245 Japanese planes were involved in the raid but only 7 were destroyed because Darwin was poorly defended.

A greater number of bombs were dropped on Darwin than were used in the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The damage done by the Japanese included:
- 23 aircraft destroyed
- 10 ships sunk
- 25 ships damaged

Concerned at the effect of the bombing on national morale, the government announced that only 17 people had been killed.
The Japanese air attacks occurred 64 times between the February 19, 1942 and November 1943.

Women and children were ordered to evacuate Darwin, most leaving by boat to cities where they had no family, many would never return to Darwin.

Nearly half of Darwin's civilian population of 2,000 fled the town in the following days.

During the war other towns in Northern Australia were also the target of Japanese air attack, with bombs being dropped on Townsville, Katherine, Wyndham, Derby, Broome and Port Hedland. There were also Japanese submarine attacks off the East Coast of Australia.

Two weeks after the attack on Darwin, Broome suffered Australia's second worst air raid on 3 March when 70 people were killed and 24 aircraft including 16 flying boats were destroyed.

Simultaneous to the raid on Broome, eight Japanese fighters hit Wyndham. Broome was again hit on 20 March, the same day that Derby suffered its only raid. Horn Island was hit on 14 March and additional raids met no air resistance but ceased in August 1942.

In late July 1942, three raids were made on Townsville which was by then the most important air base in Australia. Three Kawanishi flying boats dropped bombs on the harbour on the night of 25–26 July and lone flying boats returned on the nights of 27–28 and 28–29 July. A final raid took place on the Australian east coast on the night of 30 July when a single bomb was dropped in Cairns.

The Japanese invasion of Timor was successful and occurred the day after the Darwin bombings on 20th January.

Then on 23rd January 1942 they also successfully invaded an island called New Britain and took over the port of Rabaul to use it as a base for a major invasion of New Guinea.

The Japanese wanted to capture Port Moresby, the capital city of Papua New Guinea, as it was the only place in the whole country with a good harbour and docks, storage sheds, a guaranteed water supply and air fields from which they could easily organise an amphibian invasion of Australia.

On 21/22 July 1942, a Japanese convoy arrived at Gona Buna and successfully landed troops and took it over.

This was the first step in their plan to use the Kokoda trail to reach and capture Port Moresby.

The Kokoda track cuts through 96 kilometres of dense jungle and over mountains. Much of it can only be travelled on foot, which meant that all supplies and heavy equipment had to be carried.
The Kokoda action lasted until November 1942 and is remembered as one of the most difficult operations by Australian troops in World War II.

At first, the Japanese attack was successful. Despite winning some hard-fought battles, Australian troops were forced to retreat towards Port Moresby.

Supplies ran short and tropical diseases such as malaria reduced the fighting ability of the men. There were few stretchers to carry the wounded, and even badly wounded men were forced to walk.

The Papuan people had suffered badly at the hands of the Japanese, and many were fiercely loyal to the Australian forces: they cared for the retreating wounded Australian soldiers, who nicknamed them ‘fuzzy-wuzzy angels’.

Between 21 July and 16 November 1942, Australia lost over 600 men who were either killed or died of wounds during the battle of the Kokoda Track.

A further 1,000 were wounded.

(The exact number of Japanese casualties is not known but it may be as high as 8,500)

The bravery and courage of Australia’s troops stopped the Japanese advance to Port Morseby and drove them back to the northern coast where they were later defeated.

The Isurava Memorial was erected in 2002 and remembers all those Australians and Papua New Guineans who fought and those who died on the Kokoda Track in 1942.

Isurava was the site of some of the most intense fighting in the campaign.

The memorial features four Australian black granite pillars that are each inscribed with a single word: ‘courage’, ‘endurance’, ‘mateship’, and ‘sacrifice’ representing the values and qualities of those Australian soldiers who fought along the Kokoda Track.