

75 YEARS AFTER THE BOMBING OF DARWIN - A STORY OF RECONCILIATION, HOPE AND PEACE

On 19 February 2017 Australia commemorated the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Darwin. Two air raids were conducted on 19 February 1942 involving, collectively, more than 240 Japanese aircraft and resulting in eleven ships being sunk and 235 people being killed that day. Many more were injured and suddenly Australia looked vulnerable to not only Japanese attacks but also to possible invasion.

Those first air raids were a precursor to what was a prolonged air offensive that targeted not only Darwin, but many towns and cities across Australia's Top End including Broome, Wyndham, Port Hedland, Derby, Katherine, Townsville, Mossman and Horn Island. The initial panic and confusion caused by the raids ultimately subsided as a more intensive and coordinated defence was established. Some 97 air raids were conducted over Australian soil, 64 of which targeted Darwin, while the Japanese also conducted numerous reconnaissance flights. The last Japanese air raid on Darwin was conducted on 12 November 1943.



An example of the destruction wrought on Darwin – oil tanks on fire on the wharf with HMAS Deloraine visible in the harbour in the foreground. The mushroom cloud is from the explosion of the ammunition ship Neptuna.

With this in mind, a function recalling the events of those days was held at Parliament House, Canberra, on Thursday 16 February 2017. The function commended the work of a remarkable Japanese man, and the goodwill of the people of Darwin which nurtured hopes of reconciliation and peace in the decades following the end of hostilities.

Fourteen years after World War II Darwin had mostly been re-built and attention turned to salvaging the ships that lay on the harbour floor. Controversially, the salvage contract to perform this important work was awarded to a Japanese company, the Fujita Salvage Company, owned by Mr Ryugo Fujita. This created a storm in the southern states but in Darwin itself, while some were resentful, many more welcomed the salvage company and the 120 workers brought in to conduct the salvage operation. It

may have been this spirit of generosity that sparked a remarkable act of peace and reconciliation by Mr Fujita.

At the same time that the salvage operation was underway, a decision was made to build the Darwin Memorial United Church (now Darwin Memorial Uniting Church), on the site of the former United States Military Headquarters on Smith Street, which had received a direct hit in one of the Japanese bombing raids. The architect of the new church was Mr Graham Brown, who was also the President of the Asia-Australia Association.



One of the 77 bronze crosses presented by Mr Fujita to the Darwin Memorial United Church

With the support of the then Japanese Ambassador to Australia, Mr Katsushiro Narita, Mr Fujita looked for a way to personally make some reparation for the damage caused by the Japanese bombing raids on the city. He had struck up a friendship with Detective Sergeant Barry Tiernan of the Police Special Branch, appointed to protect Mr Fujita and his salvage teams, and they discussed what opportunities may exist for Mr Fujita's act of reconciliation. Detective Sergeant Tiernan was a member of the then United Church in Northern Australia and through this association knew the church architect, Mr Brown, who in turn, through his presidency of the Asia-Australia Association, had come to know the Japanese Ambassador, Mr Narita. This confluence of associations

led Mr Brown to ask Ambassador Narita if his government would donate brass from the salvaged ships to make a cross for the new church. Consequently 77 bronze crosses were cast from the internal metalwork from SS *Zealandia*, a cargo and passenger steamship requisitioned as a transport during the war. The crosses were donated to the new church to be permanently displayed as a sign of peace and reconciliation. Many of these crosses are on the end of the pews in that church.

However, the connections did not end there. The United Church in the city of Kyoto in Japan, donated the pulpit and lectern frontals for this new church in Darwin. The frontals were made of gold silk with birds expressing a spirit of joy, flying over the waves to bring a message of peace across the seas. With this gift came the following words: 'May this gift unite two United Churches in Kyoto and Darwin as a symbol of reconciliation in Christ'.



Senior members of the Fujita Salvage Company on board *British Motorist* in 1959; L-R: Kazutaka Kobayashi (Chief Operator of salvages), Sohei Fujita (elder son), Ryugo Fujita (President of Fujita Salvage Company), Senichiro Fujita (younger son), Takeichiro Yukiata (Chief of Workers) (Frank J Cleggett Collection, NT Library).

The new church building was opened on 23 July 1960 and dedicated as a memorial to 'people of all denominations killed in Darwin during the war'. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Mr Fujita said he was grateful the gifts would help peace and goodwill between Japan and Australia. At that same service Ambassador Narita said, "Now, half a generation later, I greet with pleasure the establishment of friendly relations between Australia and Japan."

Mr Fujita's company salvaged most of the ships from Darwin Harbour sending 70,000 tons of material, mostly iron, back to Japan for recycling.

Several generations of the Fujita family have since maintained links with Darwin. In 2010, Mr Fujita's son, Senichiro, passed the company's records of the salvage operation to the Northern Territory Government for preservation. Film footage of the salvage operation, taken by Mr Fujita, has also been digitised and was shown as part of the ceremony at Parliament House.

The film footage shows locals sitting on picnic rugs watching on as various vessels were raised to the surface. The first ship to be raised was the tanker MV *British Motorist*, less her engine room which was too heavy to re-float and which remains at the bottom of the

harbour. Consequently her fore and aft sections were welded together and accommodation huts were constructed on her deck for Mr Fujita and his crew to live in. *British Motorist* was also used for various functions and hosting dignitaries such as the then Governor-General, Viscount Dunrossil and Lady Dunrossil, and Dame Pattie Menzies. To the great appreciation of the local community many Darwin locals were also invited aboard on special occasions.

The actions of Mr Fujita and Mr Narita in actively seeking to rebuild peace and goodwill between Japan and Australia offer a different perspective on the horrors of the bombing of Darwin in 1942.

The loan of one of the crosses to the Federal Parliament is a symbol of reconciliation and peace at a time when we remember the atrocities and huge loss of life that occurred in various war zones in 1942. This post-war story adds a sense of hope to what was a time of hopelessness in 1942; a story of reconciliation, grown out of death and destruction. May we take inspiration from it and strive in our peacemaking endeavours.

Today, Darwin Memorial Uniting Church has added a memorial reflection pool in its Peace Garden in the Darwin's central business district as a space for quiet and contemplation in the midst of a bustling, growing city.

Mr Luke Gosling, the Member for Solomon, hosted the event at Federal Parliament which included addresses by the Hon Bill Shorten and other Northern Territory politicians, as well as the Community Engagement and Peace Project Facilitator from Darwin Memorial Uniting Church, Ms Lauren Merritt. There were also representatives from the United States and Japanese Embassies as well as relatives of some of those killed in the Darwin bombing.



The ceremony at Parliament House was attended by many people with a personal connection to the bombing of Darwin. Also in attendance were CDF, Air Chief Marshall Mark Binskin, AC, and the Director of the Australian War Memorial, Dr Brendan Nelson, AO.

It was a moving tribute both to all those killed and injured in the bombing of Darwin, and also to Mr Ryugo Fujita and people like him in seeking reparation, peace and goodwill between Japan and Australia. I felt privileged to have been part of this wonderful ceremony. The exhibition is called "Salvage to Salvation" and various panels tell the story along with one of the crosses that is currently loaned to the Federal Parliament.

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