

On 7 December 2011, the Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia declared the 19 February each year as a National Day of Observance to be known as Bombing of Darwin Day.

Bombing of Darwin Day commemorates the lives lost in the series of attacks across Northern Australia and provides an opportunity to appropriately remember and acknowledge those, including surviving veterans and civilians, who contributed to the defence of our country during World War II.

The recognition of this National Day of Observance ensures that the older generation has the opportunity to pass the baton of remembrance to younger Australians, so they too may understand the place this historic event holds in our lives today and ensure that our nation never forgets the horrors of war and the value of peace.



Figure 1. The Herald Newspaper Clipping

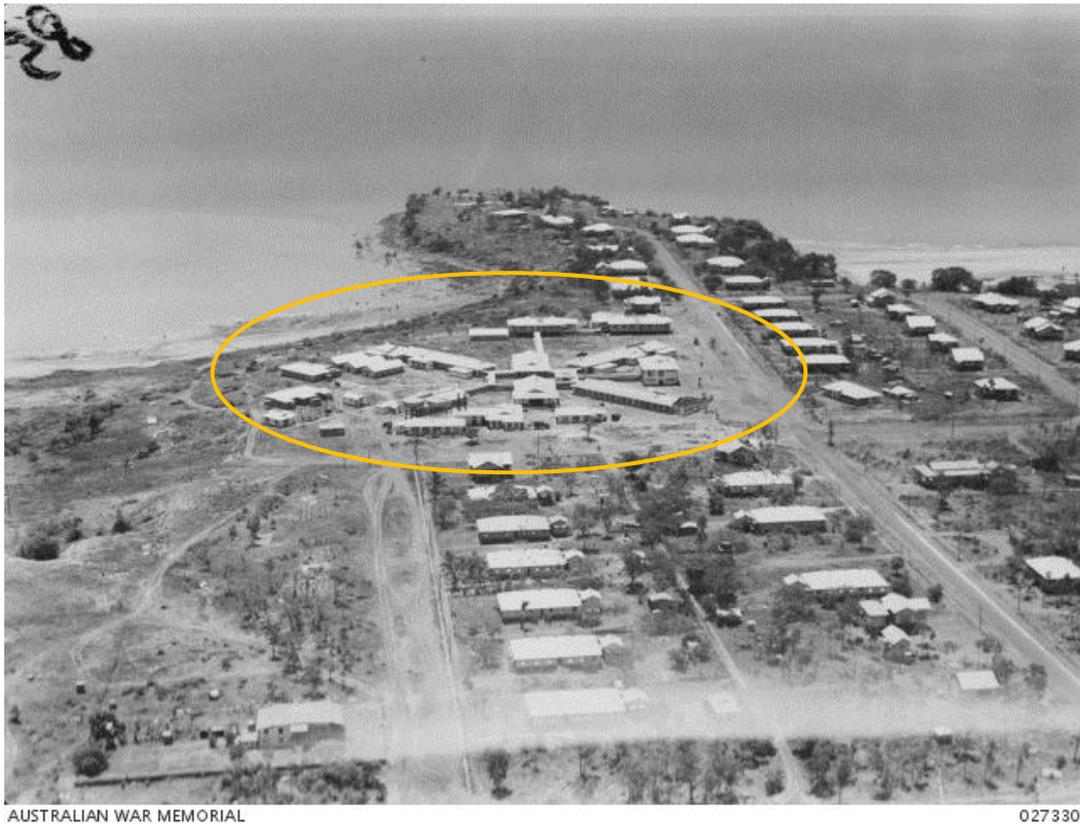


Figure 2. Aerial View of Darwin Hospital.

### **THE NEW CIVILLIAN & MILITARY HOSPITAL DARWIN (CULLEN BAY)**

Construction of an 89-bed hospital fronting Lambell Terrace commenced in 1941 to cater for Darwin's population of 4,000. The new hospital opened on 2 February 1942 and was bombed just 17 days later during the first two bombing raids by the Japanese on Darwin-19 February 1942. There were a total of 64 raids on Darwin over an 18 month period from 1942 to 1943.

At 9:57 am on 19 February 1942, the air raid sirens first sounded, coinciding with the sounds of exploding bombs and machine guns from the attacking Japanese aircraft. The 188 enemy aircraft had been launched early that morning from four aircraft carriers stationed several hundred kilometres northwest of Darwin in the Timor Sea. A second raid of 54 high-level Japanese bombers occurred at 11:57 am. The two raids killed 235 people, with over 400 wounded. Thirty Allied aircraft were destroyed, including nine out of ten flying in defence of Darwin. Nine ships inside the harbour and

two outside were sunk, and many of Darwin's civil and military facilities were damaged or destroyed.

These are some of the stories of not only those who fought to protect Australia but also those who bravely fought to save the lives of the injured during the two-hour battle of Darwin.

Kettle, E. (1986). *The First Darwin Hospital*. <https://www.pastmasters.org.au/1st-darwin-hospital.html>

National Archives of Australia. (2020). The Bombing of Darwin.

<https://www.naa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/fs-195-the-bombing-of-darwin.pdf>

Figure 1. 15 Killed, 24 Hurt in Darwin Attacks (1942, February 20). *The Herald* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1861 - 1954), p. 1. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article245103582>

Figure 2. Australian War Memorial. (1942, October 19). *Aerial View of Darwin Hospital*. [Image]. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C10906>

**YOUNG AUSTRALIAN NURSE KILLED**  
**Sister Margret De Mestre - Bombing of Hospital Ship Manunda**



Figure 1. Sister Margret De Mestre

Sister Margaret de Mestre, of Victoria, aged 26, was killed as a result of enemy action when Japanese bombers attacked the hospital ship Manunda, which, with its large red cross clearly visible, was lying in Darwin harbour during the raid. Her name will appear on the honour roll of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital as the first A.I.F. nurse to be killed in action in this war.

Since her school days, Margaret de Mestre had aspired to be a nurse, a goal she achieved through dedication and hard work. Her aunt, Sister Sarah de Mestre, then senior sister at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, was awarded the Royal Red Cross for her services during the Great War.

Margaret entered the hospital as a probationer at 19, graduating four years later as a sister. She was one of the first nurses to enlist when the war began and made many

trips on the Manunda. Sent to Darwin following the outbreak of hostilities in the Pacific, she tragically lost her life during the bombing. Although Tokyo radio claimed that their airmen spared a hospital ship in the harbour, photographs showed that bombs caused extensive damage to the Manunda, resulting in Sister de Mestre's death.



Figure 2. The Manunda, Hospital Ship.

Bombing of Manunda (1942, March 13). *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA : 1895 - 1954), p. 4.  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article95155742>

Figure 1. Virtual War Memorial Australia. (n.d.) Margaret Augusta De Mestre. [Image].  
<https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/625596>

Figure 2. Australian War Memorial. (1944). *Hospital Ship Manunda*. [Image].  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C174612>

## CAMPERDOWN DOCTOR WITNESSES FIRST AIR RAID ON AUSTRALIA

### Treats Darwin Casualties on Hospital Ship

Doctor J. Morlet, of Camperdown witnessed the first air raid on Australia on 19 February 1942 from aboard a hospital ship bombed in Darwin Harbour. In a letter to his wife, written six days after the raid, Dr Morlet described the courage and resilience of the wounded and medical staff amid the chaos.

He recounted operating tirelessly, often under fire, with makeshift equipment after the ship sustained severe damage. Despite personal injuries, he continued to treat patients, highlighting the remarkable spirit of the soldiers, nurses, and crew.

#### MARVELLOUS SPIRIT SHOWN ON BOTH SIDES

“I am perfectly fit and cheery—tired naturally, after six days of absolutely hectic work operating, dressing and helping all these poor broken men, and helping many to have an easier death.”

“Jove, they are wonderful, these chaps, burnt and shattered and shot to ribbons, and not a moan out of them. And the Sisters, and the Merchant Service chaps, and our own boys of all ranks, what a spirit of co-operation they have all shown, despite incessant work, lack of sleep and proper meals. It has really been a wonderful experience.”

"I got hit in five places, all quite minor, though some are still a bit sore, and am alive to tell the tale!

I did not realise it at the time, not until I saw the blood running down the right arm and right leg. This did not mean that I had to stop for a moment, the work of dressing the wounded, and there was plenty to do.

Of the 210 on board, 12 lost their lives and 70 were wounded.



Figure 1. Anzac Day marching banner

#### DAMAGE TO SHIP

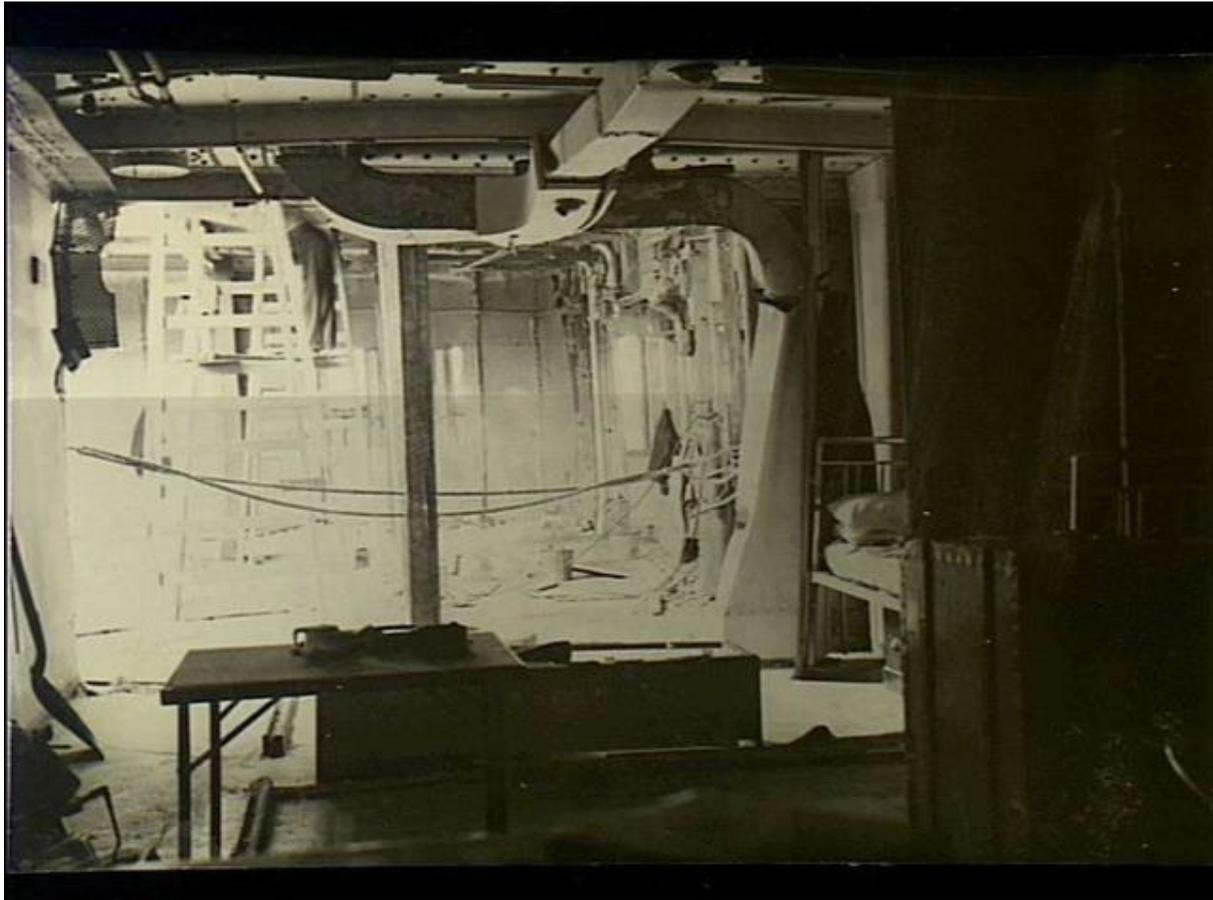
"It's hard to know where to start, but here is a brief summary:"

"The raid started about 10 AM and went on for over two hours, shore things hit (I can't say what, I suppose), and then our own show."

"Near misses from bombs, rocking us and sending fragments flying through the walls of the ship one direct hit, which knocked all our officers' cabins into one, they were simply a mass of matchwood. Now that the mess is cleared away, we find our seven cabins are like one big dormitory."

"Fortunately, the engine room and galley and water were not touched. Our lounge was wrecked, the dome over it was blown right over the bridge and now lies forward of bridge. Seven fires started in the ship, but with the exception of one, were quickly put out. "

"They had to patch holes in the sides of the ship, before we could sail, and so we limp along."



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

305740

Figure 2. The Hospital ship HMAS Manunda showing bomb damage

### MIRACULOUS ESCAPES

"I have not lost much kit. My field glasses were broken in the cabin, in which there's a hole in the roof of 6-in by 4-in, I was at my "action station," down on D deck. The walls and roof of it (the men's mess room) are pitted with holes of machine gun bullets and fragments of bomb. How any of us lived in there, God knows, many didn't? "

"One of the first to get a hit there was a Sister, I dressed her wounds, but she died later in the operating theatre."

We lost (killed outright by the direct hit) our dental officer, who had done a tooth of mine that same morning, a fine chap, also an orderly clerk, killed outright. The ship's staff lost many more than we military."

### TREATING CASUALTIES FOR DAYS

"Then, in the midst of our own troubles, raid casualties were arriving. And yet, in such time, what a Godsend a job of work is, though many of those jobs were pretty ghastly, operating theatre as soon as first aid finished, amputations and so on, right into the night and on and on like that for days. We got a few hours lying down the first night, but I don't think anyone slept."

"To-morrow is a week since the raid and now we are catching up on the work and can relax a little."

### AN EXPERIENCE NOT EASILY FORGOTTEN

"My wounds, if you can call them such, are healing, an X-ray taken today (26th), of right thigh (which was pretty sore), showed a lump of metal about the size of a fingernail, my own personal souvenir. Will get it out one day soon. "

"My shirt has two holes in it, and shorts one. I have much indeed to be thankful for. Another sister's life is hanging in the balance, as I write. I suppose about half of us got marks of some kind and all have had miraculous escapes."

"But I wouldn't have missed this ghastly experience for anything. To see women and men of all ranks showing so much "guts"— and pulling together so wonderfully, is a thing one won't easily forget."

Camperdown Doctor Witnesses First Air Raid on Australia (1942, April 7). *Camperdown Chronicle* (Vic. : 1875 - 1954), p. 1. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article26091819>

Figure 1. Australian War Memorial. (1942–1950s). *Anzac Day marching banner : 2/1 Australian Hospital Ship Manunda* [Image].

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1032078>

Figure 2. Australian War Memorial. (1942). *Photo of the Hospital Ship Manunda, Showing Damage Done by Japanese Bombs at Darwin on 19.* [Image].  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C31578>

## **DARWIN HOSPITAL STAFF DEVOTION TO DUTY UNDER BOMBING “SPECIAL RECOGNITION”**

The courage, steadfastness and tireless devotion to duty of the medical and nursing staff at Darwin Civil Hospital during the Japanese air raids may receive special recognition. The Minister for Health, Mr Holloway, announced his intention to recommend some form of special recognition to the Prime Minister, Mr Curtin.

A report from Surgeon Commander H.A. James, R.A.N.R., on the Darwin raids highlighted the medical and nursing staffs exemplary conduct under fire. Mr Holloway stated that their actions were an epic of devotion to duty.

The first casualty, requiring the amputation of a leg, reached the operating room just minutes after the first bomb fell outside the hospital. This was followed by numerous cases of varying severity, demanding tireless effort from morning until night. The challenges were compounded when electric power was disrupted, forcing the staff to rely on a primus stove and hand torches. Pain relief was provided through sedatives and every moment between bombings was seized to continue critical operations.

The outstanding courage, calmness, and tireless dedication of Dr Kirkland, Chief Medical Officer, Dr Catalano, Senior Medical Officer, and Matron Knox set an inspiring example, contributing to the absence of panic among the hospital staff.

Darwin Hospital Staff (1942, May 13). *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA : 1895 - 1954), p. 4.  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article94819455>

### MBE FOR BRAVE DARWIN NURSE

Despite extreme danger from enemy bombing, Sister E.M. Neenan (now Mrs H. Elcock) of Alice Springs quietly and efficiently managed housekeeping operations, ensuring continuous service at Darwin Hospital during the 1942 Japanese raids. Lord Gowrie, Governor-General, announced today that that Sister Neenan has been appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (Civil Division) for her courageous conduct and meritorious service.

The citation notes that, in addition to organising housekeeping, Sister Neenan supervised the clearing of debris in and around the hospital buildings and managed the dignified disposal of the deceased brought to the mortuary.



Figure 1. Sisters with the RAAF Nursing Service and patients in a ward of the RAAF

MBE for Brave Darwin Nurse (1943, July 17). *The Argus (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957)*, p. 5. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article11785956>

Figure 1. Australian War Memorial. (1941). *Darwin, NT. c. 1941-01. Sisters with the RAAF Nursing Service and patients in a ward of the RAAF* [Image] <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C291628>

## **DARWIN WOUNDED DESCRIBE HEROISM AT HOSPITAL**

Australia's first ambulance train reached Sydney today, carrying 90 wounded men representing the three fighting services and members of the Merchant Marine. All were wounded in Darwin, some during the Japanese bombing of Darwin Hospital. Numerous The cot cases were numerous and ten ambulance wagons were used to transport them to hospitals.

Wounded military personnel were taken to Concord Military Hospital, while Mercantile Marine members and several civilians were admitted to public institutions. Despite the severity of their injuries, the men remained cheerful, smiling gratefully as members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) distributed cigarettes. Crowds of relatives and friends greeted them, with many emotional scenes.

Naval personnel paid high tribute to Surgeon Commander James for his bravery, recounting how he continued operating on a sick sailor as Japanese bombs fell. Although the hospital rocked from a blast just 30 yards away, he remained at the operating table and later oversaw the evacuation of naval staff. The wounded also praised the courage of the nurses and sisters who steadfastly remained at their posts during the bombing.

The men vividly described the Japanese air raids and the determination of Darwin's people, who sought shelter amid a storm of flying bomb fragments.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P02625.004

Figure 1. Nurses check on their patients in a busy ward

Darwin Wounded Describe Heroism at Hospital (1942, March 13). *Northern Star*

(Lismore, NSW : 1876 - 1954), p. 5. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article98958301>

Figure 1. Australian War Memorial. (1942). *Berrimah, NT. February 1942. Nurses check on their patients in a busy ward of No. 119 Australian*. [Image].

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C348198>