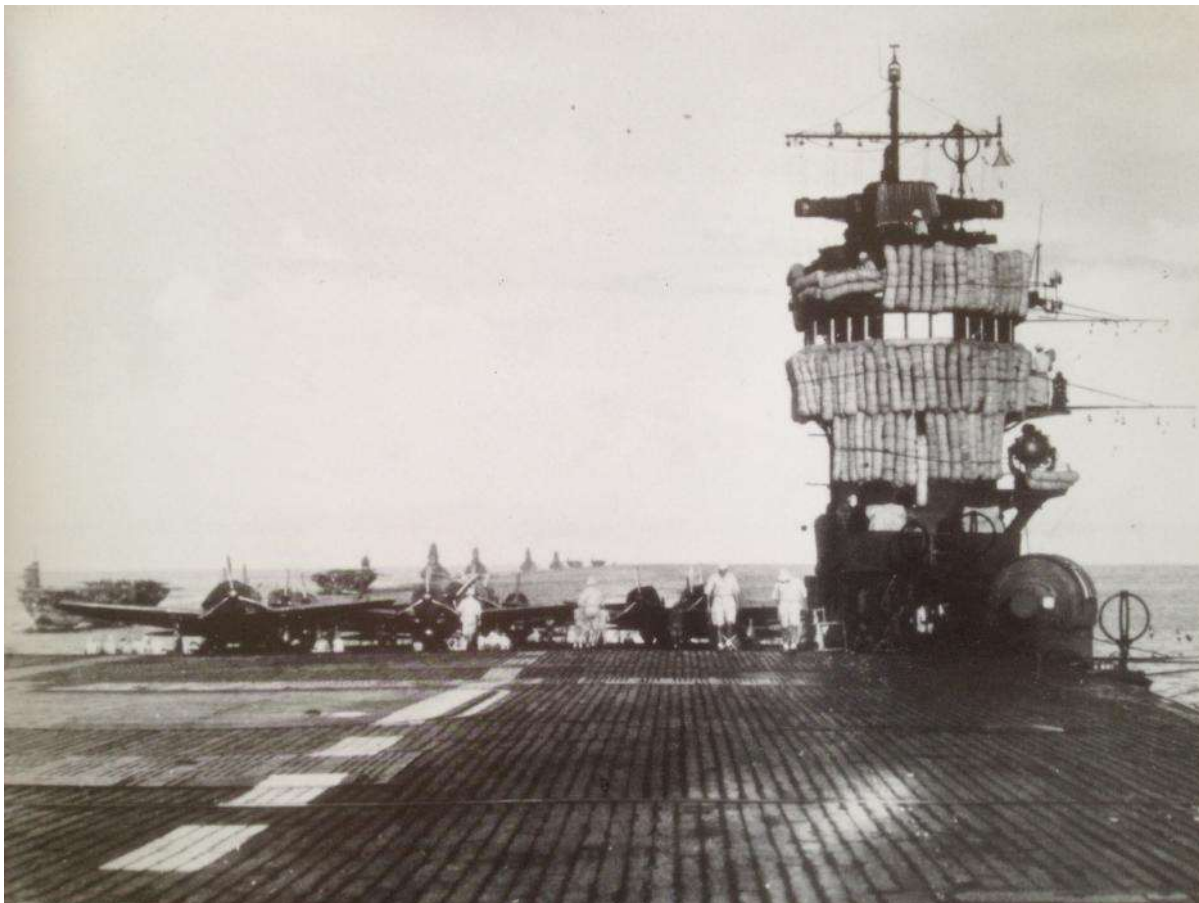


## The extent of WWII Japanese air raids across northern Australia

By Dr Tom Lewis OAM

An examination of Japanese air records from World War II has revealed a much bigger picture of warfare across the Top End of Australia than previously thought.

In addition, the stories of how scores of aircraft were brought down has for the first time revealed a human face in the two year fight for aerial supremacy. The struggle was first won by the Imperial Japanese Navy, but then wrested from them by Allied forces.



*Japanese WWII carrier power at sea. Two other carriers in the background lead three battleships or battlecruisers, with two or three carriers behind (Lewis Collection)*

We now know for the first time the names of nearly 200 enemy aircrew whose remains still lie in Australian soil or in our country's coastal seas.

The Pacific War first came to Australia in January 1942. On the 20th a short sharp battle was fought outside Darwin Harbour between a big 80-man submarine, and an Australian corvette. *HMAS Deloraine* prevailed, and the submarine was smashed into the seabed by depth charges. The *I-124* remains outside the Harbour to this day, and her three companion submarines fled. But the Japanese High Command still wanted to close down Darwin's extensive facilities, including a massive protected harbour and airfields, and so the next month they sent four aircraft carriers south.

Before that attack however, an aerial action fought on 15 February saw the first Allied loss of life together with the death of the first Japanese airman.<sup>1</sup> To the north of Bathurst Island, a lone P-40 Kittyhawk fighter pilot

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese movements were sourced primarily from the Kodochocho, that is, the record of imperial forces in WWII, specifically flights over northern Australia, accessed through records of the Japanese forces in WWII, now held in the Military History Department of the National Institute for Defence Studies, Tokyo. The Kodochocho gives limited information. Basically it shows the number of aircraft taking part; their destination; armaments loaded out and expended, and whether aircraft were damaged or lost. In most case the flight leader's name is given.

took on a four-engined Japanese seaplane. The aircraft shot each other down, and Lieutenant Robert Buel of the United States Army Air Force, and radio operator Kinichi Furakawa, died as a result of the fight. Neither aircraft nor the body of either man was ever found. It was a lonely death for both, thousands of kilometres from their homelands, and it signaled the start of many a similar aerial fight.

Four days later the Japanese Navy trounced Darwin in a massive airstrike, flying off 188 aircraft from four aircraft carriers. The Zeroes shot down nine out of ten of the defending Kittyhawks, and the Kate and Val bombers laid waste to the town, harbour and airfields. Two hours later the shattered survivors of the northern capital were hit again, this time with 54 heavy bombers flying from land bases. Eleven ships were sunk, 30 aircraft destroyed and 236 Allied people killed. Two of the Japanese aircrew died.<sup>2</sup>

Both Buel's story and the air raid of 19 February had been told before, however. So why is it important to cover them again using Japanese records?<sup>3</sup> It was to separate the truth from myth; to tell the enemy's human stories, and to publish the findings so all can know of a previously obscure part of World War II. The complete findings were published in my work *The Empire Strikes South*, released in February 2017.

### ***A Much Bigger Fight Than Previously Thought***

So what did the Japanese sources tell us?

Using Japanese records the new research shows previous estimates of the attacks made on northern Australia have been well understated.

There were in total 1,883 enemy flights over northern Australia in World War II. This was in 208 combined missions – some of which saw more than 50 aircraft attacking the same target.

There were 77 raids on the Northern Territory reported, rather than 64 often previously claimed.

The first raid, the devastating strike on 19 February against Darwin, saw 188 aircraft within the strike force: 36 fighters, 81 high-level bombers, and 72 divebombers.

The attacking Japanese forces then settled down to a pattern of raiding regularly over the next two years.

The numbers of enemy aircraft being brought down by the defending Allied fighters, anti-aircraft guns, radar and searchlight combination are startling too. The Japanese lost 62 aircraft, their remains scattered across the waters and arid bush of the north, with many remaining lost and most of the 186 aircrew who died unburied.

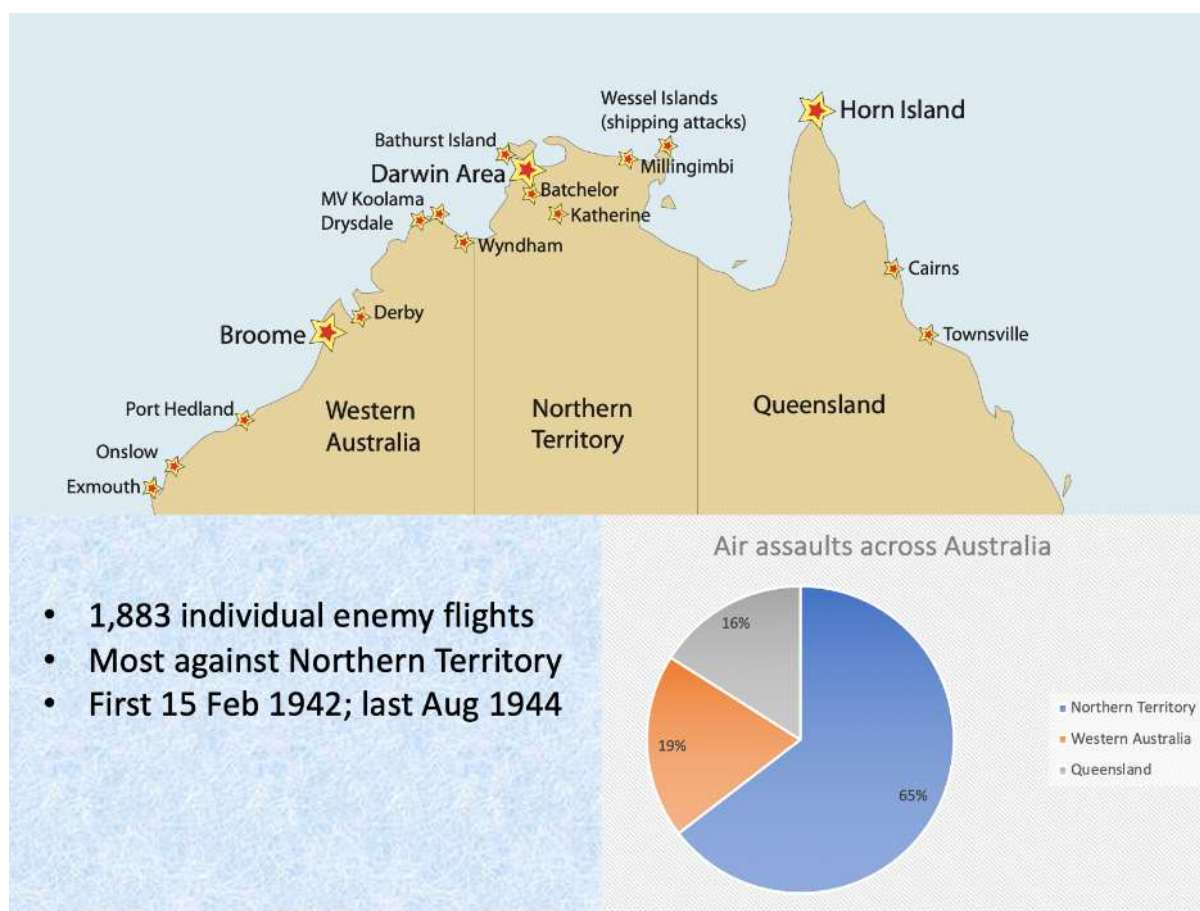
The bombers kept coming. Every week, from Exmouth to Townsville, there were air raids, often involving scores of incoming enemy aircraft at a time.



*Japanese Betty bomber interior (top) and en route. Stills taken for publicity purposes from the Darwin midday raid of 19 February 1942. (Japanese Self-Defence Force)*

<sup>2</sup> Alford. *Japanese Air Forces Over the NWA 1942-1945*. Pages 46-47. See also Rayner, Robert. *The Army and the defence of Darwin fortress*. Rudder Press, 1995. (p. 188) The latest statistics are derived from Lewis and Ingman's *Carrier Attack* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> This essay draws its conclusions and material largely from research carried out over four years for a book on the overall Japanese aircraft attacks over the two years across the entire northern frontier. *The Empire Strikes South* (Avonmore Books, 2017) lists all of the names of the aircrews; their machines; circumstances, and geographical activities.



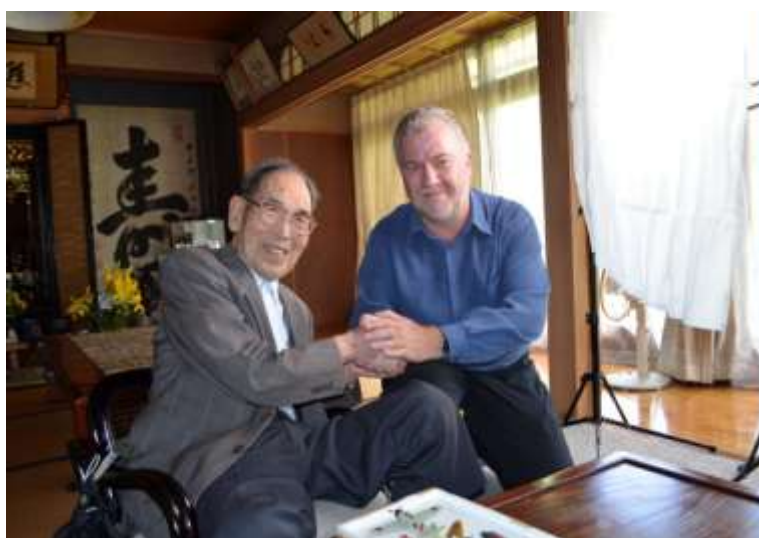
### ***The Last Zero Pilot***

The individual combat reports, seen through Japanese eyes, bring an understanding of them as humans, not only enemy.

Their stories include that of “the last Zero pilot” Kaname Harada. Harada flew in the first raid on Darwin, and was disappointed to find on his arrival in the rear echelons of machines that all of the defending Kittyhawks had been vanquished. Such aggression was a most necessary part of being a fighter pilot. But Harada found blood later in his military career. He was involved in many aerial dogfights, and shot down too, surviving a crash-landing on a Pacific island. He lived through the final savage months of the Japanese Empire’s devastation, and returned to a shattered Japan.

Depressed at his deeds and his rejection from society, by the 1960s Harada was in despair. His wife suggested that embracing humanity rather than destroying it might make a new man of him, and Harada put his personal money into the building of a kindergarten in his native Nagano, three hours north of Tokyo.

He went on to preach against the folly of war, and only died in 2016, although I was able to interview him for his story before that, in his home where he was looked after by a daughter. He was a philosophical man: open about the war, and still sad too about the loss of both his comrades and the enemy fliers he fought.



*Harada with the author in his home*

### ***The First Captured***

One of Harada's friends, downed on 19 February over Darwin, was also flying an A6M2 Zero, from the carrier *Hiryu*. It was flown by Flyer3c, Hajime Toyoshima, a graduate of the 56th Class Oita Air Group in July 1941.

The aircraft had its oil tank holed by a .303" round over Darwin and was nearing Melville Island, returning to the carriers, when the engine seized and the propeller sheared off. The naval flier chose to force-land his crippled aircraft with a wheels-up landing in a lightly timbered valley, striking his face on the gun sight and suffering facial injuries but otherwise unhurt.

Wandering aimlessly for some time Toyoshima came across a group of young Aboriginal women and children. The pilot was soon captured by a young Aboriginal, Matthias Ulungura. Matthias was with some friends but carried out the deed alone, thus becoming the first Australian to take a Japanese prisoner of war on Australian soil.<sup>4</sup> A statue was recently erected to Matthias on Bathurst Island, a full-size bronze which hopefully will be part of a new interest in how the northern Aboriginals joined the fight for Australia in the time of great national need.

Toyoshima, giving a false name when he was handed over to Australian Army sergeant Les Powell, was transported south to Cowra, NSW, where a vast Prisoner Of War camp had been set up.

Many months later the Zero pilot was one of the leaders of the mass breakout of Japanese servicemen. Toyoshima took his own life outside the wire, when it became obvious the prisoners' escape was not succeeding. Rather than suffer to what Japanese eyes was the terrible dishonour of being captured a second time he slashed his own throat with a borrowed knife. Toyoshima is buried nearby in the Japanese war cemetery at Cowra along with hundreds of his countrymen, thousands of kilometres from their homeland and their families.<sup>5</sup>

### **Down for the count north of Darwin**

Another human story concerned the family of another pilot shot down north of Darwin. Shinji Kawahara died off the Northern Territory coast, on 17 August 1943, in a fight of Point Charles, north of Darwin Harbour. His Dinah twin-engined aircraft with its two crew were downed by two Spitfires.

The Dinahs were fast, armed, and maneuverable. Their mission was to photograph a target, and the developed pictures would provide an attack target – or not – for the bombers. On this occasion the Dinah was not fast enough: the plane was brought down and its two aircrew – CPOs Tomihiko Tanaka and Shinji Kawahara – were recovered.<sup>6</sup>

Airman Kawahara's wife Miyoko survived the war with her two children. But she never forgot her husband, Decades later when she died her family were well aware of her wish to be re-united in death with Shinji.

Miyoko was cremated. The family then set about trying to find out how to have her ashes scattered in Northern Territory waters, in a land far away from Japan, where their language was little



*The author (front right) assists the daughter of Miyoko Kawahara in the scattering of the ashes ceremony off Darwin (Photo: TVWorks)*

<sup>4</sup> In some sources he is named as Matthias Ngapiatulawai. The surname spelling of Ulungura varies with two "L's" on occasion, but the most prevalent uses one.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, Harry. *Voyage from Shame: The Cowra Breakout and Afterwards*. University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, St Lucia, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> RAAF. Caldwell, Wing Commander Clive R. Narrative to Combat Report, "Enemy Air Reconnaissance No. 4. 17<sup>th</sup>. Aug.1943." See also *Fighter Combat Report*. Flight Sergeant PA Padula. 17 August 1943. See also Alford file on Shinji Kawahara.

understood. Imagining trying to arrange such a matter for your own family, in perhaps Nigeria, might give an idea of the depth of the problem.

But in a combined effort from the Australian-Japanese Association, the Federal and Territory governments, and the Darwin City Council, success was achieved. Several family members journeyed to the Territory for a cautious meeting: would they be welcomed or rejected? The knowledge of the Prisoner Of War camp stories is well enough known to Japan's older generation.

But success was achieved. A boat was arranged, courtesy of the Navy. A reception was arranged in Darwin's Parliament House. An afternoon tea was arranged, courtesy of the Council. One calm Dry season afternoon off a Steber launch the ashes of a Japanese lady joined her husband's body in the sparkling blue waters of the Top End. A Japanese family returned home, and a bridge had been built between two countries, once long ago enemies but now trying to cautiously be friends.

### ***Mum's Memento Never Makes It***

Another curious story concerns an ace brought to earth near what is today a popular fishing spot. On 17 August 1943 Squadron Leader KE James, CO of 457 Squadron of Spitfires, intercepted and shot down another Dinah.

Ken James intercepted the enemy aircraft at 30,500 feet and effectively machinegunned it. Killed in the crash were Lieutenants Shin-ichi Matsu-Ura and Kyotoshi Shiraki. Curiously, in the wreckage, when the Intelligence team got to it, was found "a big Japanese doll".<sup>7</sup>

Subsequent investigation found that the doll had been provided by another airman's family. Captain Shunji Sasaki's mother had sent the doll to be released "where she believed her son had died on 18 July. She had also donated ¥3,000 towards a new aircraft."

Sasaki, a well-known Japanese ace, had himself been brought down some weeks before, with his navigator, over what is today known as "Shady Camp" – a well-patronised fishing and camping location. Both crew members were buried on site by RAAF personnel overseen by Intelligence Officer, Flying Officer CD Pender.

Captain Shunji Sasaki was the Commanding Officer of the 70<sup>th</sup> Dokuritsu Hiko Chutai. This unit had their headquarters at Malang in Java.<sup>8</sup> Sasaki, while only 26 years of age "...was a very excellent air officer," his biographer wrote, "...and flew many times over Australia by Dinah. It was natural that he was awarded a special citation after his death and this reached the Emperor's ear (highest honor)."<sup>9</sup>



*Bank of New South Wales in WWII, Smith Street, Darwin, from a postcard.  
The building is now the Westpac Bank at the southern end of the Darwin Mall.  
(Peter Farnden)*

Sasaki's accomplishments were further extolled in a radio broadcast from Tokyo on September 19<sup>th</sup>:

The Emperor has been informed of the citation granted to...the Sasaki Air Squadron by the Commander in Chief of the Army Air Force in the Southern regions, for meritorious service rendered in the Southern campaign and Australia region.

<sup>7</sup> Correspondence Susumu Akasaka to RN Alford 12 February 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Website. *Oz at War*. <http://www.ozatwar.com/ozcrashes/nt171.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Correspondence Ikuhiko Hata to Bob Piper. 23 November 1979. Copy held RN Alford.

The citation says that the Sasaki Air Squadron has thus far carried out 70 raids on the Australian mainland. That Squadron participated actively in the big offensive against North Australia in the last 10 days of June of this year...

The Sasaki unit contributed much to the close cooperation between the Army and Navy air combined attacks in the Australian region, and the success of the raid of June 20<sup>th</sup> by the Army Air Force was due largely to careful and accurate information obtained by that unit.

Following Rangoon, the unit performed miracles in Burma, India, Java, and Australia battles. Sasaki perished in an air reconnaissance mission to Port Darwin on July 18<sup>th</sup>.<sup>10</sup>

The deaths of all four of the Japanese airmen must have been a profound mystery to the families concerned, with them disappearing into a tropical environment thousands of kilometers away, with not even an attempt at a memorial of a sort being successful.<sup>11</sup>



*Zeros over Darwin pursue the Kittyhawk of Lieutenant Oestreicher on 19 February 1942. (Michael Claringbould)*

### ***Two years of attacks***

The Japanese air raids had begun to keep Darwin from not being a usable base, but they never achieved that. Within weeks of being blasted, the northern town was flying out deterrence patrols; the radar that had been being assembled on the 19th was operating, and the wreckage cleared away from the streets. The concept of detection of the incoming attackers; getting fighters up to height, and attacking the bombers, had begun. It worked, although not every time.

The Japanese attacks consisted invariably of an overflight a day or hours before a raid. A single aircraft, usually too high to be spotted or shot down, flew over and photographed the possible targets: the airfields dotted around Darwin; the ships in the harbour, the aircraft on the runways. Then the Betty bombers would take off,

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, Richard L. "202 Kaigun Kokutai Rebuilds." *Air Combat Australia*.

<sup>11</sup> RAAF. Combat Report. Squadron Leader KE James 18 July 1943. See also Form A50 *Unit History Sheet*. 457 Squadron and correspondence KE James to RN Alford 22 May 1989.

big lumbering long-range twin-engined machines. They would meet up with their escort of Zero fighters, and together they would approach the target.

If the RAAF and USAAF fighters could coordinate with the electronic eyes of the radar systems, and communications were working well, the Allied fighters could climb northwards to height. Once the enemy was visually detected, then the fight was on. It was always better to down the bombers before they dropped their ordnance, but that wasn't always possible. Dogfights between the P-40 Kittyhawks and the Zeroes developed, and while the Japanese fighter was the better machine, the Allied pilots learnt to use height to advantage, diving down and through the formations.

The raiders did well though, penetrating as far south as Katherine, and often bombing with considerable success while the Allied initial organisation scramble to keep up. The attacks widened, with Broome seeing the second biggest raid in terms of casualties in Australian history: 86 people dying in flying boats on 3 March in the harbour as they readied for takeoff.

In Darwin itself the dead had been buried; trees cut down to improve fields of fire, and the administration of the Territory moved south to Alice Springs. Evacuations were still continuing, this time by road and train, with everyone not essential to the war effort being sent south. The military took over the Top End, and that included newspapers too – for the rest of the war the only media was *Army News*.

Spitfires eventually arrived, a much better machine than the Kittyhawk, and airfields by the dozen were hacked out of the bush and manned. Soon the Territory was home to over 50, most of them constructed by the United States forces.

Eventually the Allies pushed the raiders back. Using radar, searchlights, and fighters in a fused network of defence, the Spitfires and Kittyhawks met the Betty bombers and their Zero escorts head on – and triumphed.

By that time scores of Japanese bodies had been recovered. They were buried to the east of Darwin at Berrimah, then the very outskirts of the town. Today a modern secondary institution stands opposite the site, but Kormilda College's students probably have little knowledge of the grim rows of grave markers that once stood across the road from their grounds. The graves were all moved in the early 1960s, and the Japanese airmen joined hundreds of their countrymen in Cowra, where they remain today.

### ***An end to the war, but a beginning to obscurity***

By the time the smoke had cleared the Japanese had lost aircrew in the hundreds, and aircraft by the score. Many of these men met their deaths in the searing heat of the bush, or the sparkling blue tropical seas of the north. Only sometimes were their bodies found. The aircraft were scavenged for intelligence purposes, and the dead aircrew hastily buried at the site.

They were sad and lonely deaths. There was of course little sympathy for the Japanese fighters, as by the time the Prisoner Of War camp stories were coming out. So for decades their story has not been fully told. There were some admirable beginnings. Douglas Lockwood, a journalist in Darwin at the time of the first raid, penned *Darwin's Pearl Harbour*, interviewed the Air Group Commander, Mitsui Fuchida, for his book. Bob Alford, an excellent Australian aviation historian, wrote *Darwin's Air War*, and in two editions analysed Japanese records to present a good overall picture.

The aircrew themselves however, remained mere ciphers and occasional names. They should be at least listed, and so research began. For these were not men behaving without honour. The least we can do is mark their graves with their stories.

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This essay draws its conclusions and material largely from research carried out for a book on the overall Japanese aircraft attacks over the two years across the entire northern frontier. *The Empire Strikes South* (Avonmore Books, 2017) lists all of the names of the aircrews; their machines; the circumstances of their final combat actions, and geographical activities. It followed the definitive description of the original raid on Darwin – *Carrier Attack* – published in 2013, by the author together with Peter Ingman.

-o-o-O-o-o-

A naval officer for 20 years, Dr Tom Lewis OAM served in Baghdad at the height of the Iraq war, where he commanded a US forces intelligence team. Originally a high school teacher, he has also lectured at the Royal Australian Naval College and ADFA, and is in popular demand for radio, television, documentaries and cruise line speaking. Awarded the Order of Australia Medal for services to history, he was the historian for commemorations of Albert Borella VC's WWI service, and the 75th anniversary of the Top End air raids. The author of 23 books, one of his works – *Atomic Salvation* – argues that the A-Bomb attacks, although brutal, saved the lives of around 30 million combatants, most of them Japanese, who would have died in a conventional invasion of the Home Islands. His latest works are *Cyclone Warriors* – the Armed Forces in Cyclone Tracy (Avonmore) and *The Secret Submarine* – about a Japanese fleet boat sunk off NSW in 1943 by two RAAF bombers.

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