

THE TERRITORY REMEMBERS 75 YEARS

Commemorating the Bombing of Darwin
and defence of Northern Australia

I-124-class submarine
(Lewis Collection courtesy Atsuko Kishigami)

The Territory Remembers

Darwin's Submarine

By Dr Tom Lewis

Outside Darwin Harbour, an enormous Japanese submarine still lies with her 80-man crew on board. She is part of the secret history of the assaults on northern Australia.

The aircraft carriers of the famous February 1942 strike were not the first major attack on the Australian landmass – they were the second strike. The first attempt to close down the northern port was made a month earlier with a submarine squadron.

In January 1942 four giant vessels of the Sixth Submarine Squadron's Imperial Japanese Navy were deployed to northern Australian waters. Darwin was a harbour of considerable strategic importance. Sweeping south after the assault on Pearl Harbor, and carrying all before them, the Japanese knew the deployment of any Allied warships or aircraft from the northern port would be a dangerous attack on their right flank as they drove east to secure New Guinea.

Built by Kawasaki Heavy Industries, the four submarines of the Sixth Submarine Squadron were armed with twelve torpedoes in four 21-inch bow tubes and a foredeck 5.5-inch gun. They carried 42 mines, launched through torpedo doors in the stern. Under the leadership of Commander Endo, they made their way south and deployed quietly around Bathurst and Melville Island.

On the morning of 20 January one of the submarines attacked the US Navy fleet oiler *USS Trinity* with three torpedoes. The tanker was escorted by two destroyers.

As the torpedoes were seen, the *USS Alden* turned and launched depth charges. The response was unsuccessful and the destroyer lost the contact and broke off the attack. But the alarm was given in Darwin.

Later the Australian corvette *Deloraine* was searching near the scene with sonar. The Bathurst-class vessel, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Desmond Menlove, was a newly launched ship, and her first action was nearly her last. *Deloraine* was ambushed by the *I-124*. Frank Marsh, a stoker on the vessel, remembered seeing: "...the trail of the torpedo which missed our stern so closely that the wake thrown up by the propellers actually caused the torpedo to come out of the raised sea surface."

The torpedo streaked towards the corvette. *Deloraine* turned right inside the torpedo's course. It missed the ship's stern by metres. Then she charged straight down the weapon's track. An attack commenced with patterns of depth charges exploding astern of the warship as she wheeled and swooped as directed by her sonar. Then a *Deloraine* bridge lookout reported the submarine was breaking the surface, and abruptly the conning tower was seen ahead.

Deloraine powered towards her enemy and this time the depth charge explosion caught the submarine as it dived. Soon sonar confirmed it as motionless on the seabed. The boat's captain, Lieutenant Commander Koichi Kishigami, his division commander Endo and 78 others were dead or trapped on board.



Later the boom defence vessel *HMAS Kookaburra* was deployed to the site and Australian divers attempted to find *I-124*. They were unsuccessful and engaged the help of divers from the American submarine repair ship *USS Holland*.

The divers found the submarine several nautical miles south of Bathurst Island with hatch gaskets blown out, suggesting the stern sections were flooded. Some reports claim that divers from the American ship *Blackhawk* descended and heard the Japanese crew, still inside, tapping on the hull. The Allies were interested in recovery: taking the submarine's codebooks would be a great intelligence coup. Secretly the Navy began to make arrangements, moving personnel and equipment to Darwin in preparation. But three weeks later Darwin was struck a shattering blow by the same carrier task force that had devastated Pearl Harbor. It was now too dangerous to attempt recovery.

However, the submarine was not to quietly lie in her grave. Controversy was the *I-124* companion for the next 50 years. Strange stories and theories surround the wreck. One sought to connect the *I-124* with a supposed Japanese submarine working with the German armed raider *Kormoran* which sank *HMAS Sydney* in November 1941. Michael Montgomery, in *Who Sank The Sydney?* suggested a submarine was refueling or re-arming *Kormoran* when the *Sydney* was sighted, dived to escape detection and torpedoed the Australian cruiser, winning the battle for the raider.

Other stories say that a seaplane was sighted in the vicinity of the battle – many Japanese boats did carry folding planes in hangars on the foredeck. Suggestions have been made that a second submarine wreck, which some claim lies nearby, could be that alleged helper of the *Kormoran*. Other stories have the *I-124* itself involved as the Japanese submarine. Other fanciful theories suggest inside the wrecked boat the captain's safe contained an answer.

More than one source suggests codebooks were indeed recovered from the *I-124*, helping to win the Pacific war. Ed Drea in MacArthur's *Ultra* wrote:

"Shortly after the outbreak of the Pacific War, US Navy divers had salvaged the Japanese Navy's Water Transport

"S" codebooks from a submarine that had been sunk off Darwin Australia in January 1942. With these documents in hand, navy cryptanalysts were able to read Japanese naval shipping messages..."

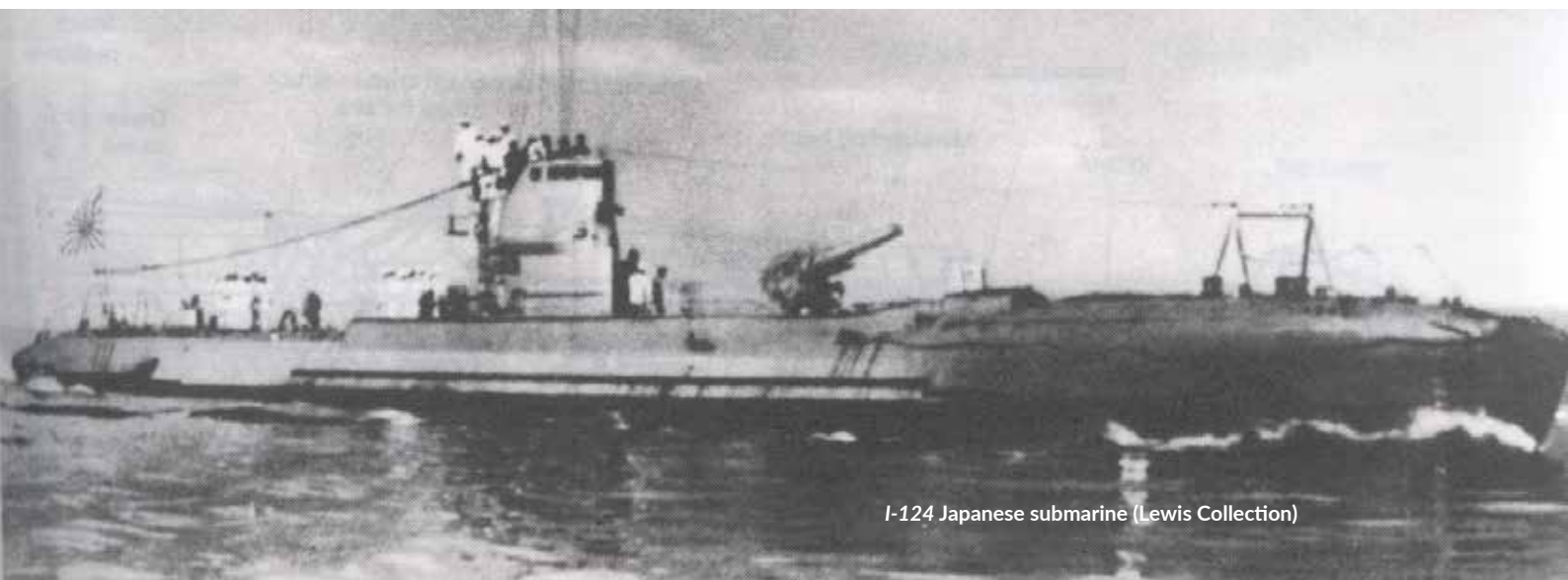
In the 1950s Atsuko Kishigami, the daughter of the sub's commander, began a campaign to have the submarine raised and its entombed bodies returned to Japan. The Japanese Fujita Salvage Company, then in Darwin salvaging the wrecks of ships still lying in the harbour, made a brief investigation into the proposal before it was decided the costs were prohibitive.

In 1972 local salvage operators Sid Hawks, Harry Baxter, George Tyers and John Chadderton began preliminary salvage work on the submarine with three vessels. But ownership disputes arose between Baxter and the remaining three, including shots fired. After a split, the potential salvors were denied rights by the Federal Government and warned off the site.

In 1976 Harry Baxter tried new recovery attempts, claiming his salvage attempts had penetrated the hull. By this time he had probably removed items from the exterior. He was warned off again and in a fit of pique went out with explosives to destroy the submarine. In November 1984 Navy divers from *HMAS Curlew* carried out descents to the boat to verify its condition: they reported the conning tower had been damaged, but the casing appeared undamaged and sealed.

In 1989 the research vessel *Flamingo Bay*, captained by David Tomlinson, sent down a Remote Operated Vehicle: an unmanned mini-submarine equipped with a TV camera. The ROV sent back pictures of the *I-124*'s conning tower, still upright but with a list to one side. With personnel from NT and WA museums involved, the *Flamingo Bay* operation hoped to dive the submarine for research purposes, but the project was eventually cancelled due to political considerations.

Stories about *I-124* continued to re-appear. Claims that a valuable cargo of mercury was present on board appeared in the media. Baxter continued to make claims about the submarine, saying he had "been arrested by ASIO". His stories appeared in the magazine *Australasian Post*, stating that he had been visited by a Japanese ambassador from

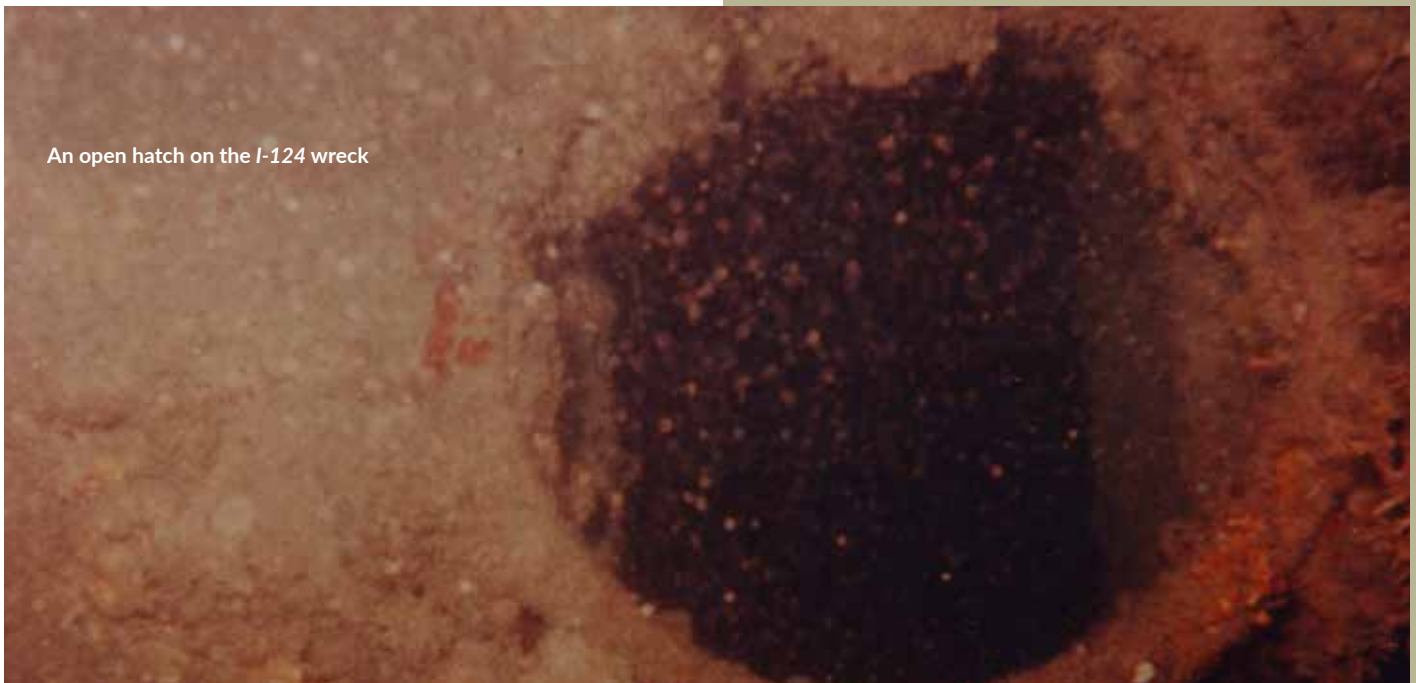


I-124 Japanese submarine (Lewis Collection)



Washington who was worried about the “ship’s safe.” Baxter died a little while later, taking any secrets with him to the grave.

I-124 still lies outside Darwin today. Strangely, she is less known to Australians than the three midget submarines which attacked Sydney Harbour also in 1942. But *I-124* remains one of the country’s most interesting stories of the country at war: a tale of bravery on both sides, loss and an insight into the secret war fought in Australia’s north.



An open hatch on the *I-124* wreck

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