



## THE TERRITORY REMEMBERS 75 YEARS

Commemorating the Bombing of Darwin  
and defence of Northern Australia

# The Territory Remembers

## Bravery and Devotion to Duty in Darwin

By Paul A Rosenzweig

**On Tuesday 19 February 2002, a commemorative service was held in Darwin to mark the 60th anniversary of the Bombing of Darwin. Before the Cenotaph, former Governor-General Sir Zelman Cowen spoke of the two Japanese air attacks on 19 February 1942 which, “brought war to the Australian mainland for the first time” – attacks which were responsible for 292 known deaths.<sup>1,2</sup>**

Other speakers, with political correctness, spoke of the actions of ‘the enemy’ on that fateful day. Only Sir Zelman, who, in February 1942 had been a Sub-Lieutenant at Naval Headquarters in Darwin, referred specifically to the Japanese and what their intent was believed to be.

As guest speaker on 19 February during the Northern Territory’s War Service Commemoration Year 1992, Sir Zelman had recalled his impressions on that day in 1942:

*“I remember early morning talk in Naval headquarters about unidentified aircraft; suddenly the warning sounded and we streamed out to the trenches ... I remember listening that night to the talk of more senior officers about the imminent prospect of attack, which was assumed as a certainty.”<sup>3</sup>*

One of those senior officers was Cowen’s Commanding Officer, Commander Laurance ‘Pup’ Tozer RAN, already a veteran of active service off northeast Africa, who came to have a significant association with Darwin.

Laurance Tozer was born in North Melbourne on 17 March 1902. At the age of 13 years and 9 months, he entered the

new RAN College at Captain’s Point, Jervis Bay as a Cadet Midshipman, a member of the fourth intake.<sup>4</sup>

He first saw service in vessels of the Australian Fleet, and gained experience on Loan Service with the Royal Navy on three occasions during the 1920s and 1930s. Bill Cook, one of the Divisional Midshipmen in *HMAS Australia (II)*, recalled that Lieutenant-Commander Tozer was Divisional Officer of the Foretop Division from 1934 to 1936:

*“Pup, as he was known to his contemporaries – but never addressed by this nickname by Midshipmen! – was a short nuggetty man, almost always in good mood, often grinning or laughing, generally of very pleasant disposition and well liked by sailors and both his senior and junior officers. He [was] what was known in the service as a ‘Salt horse’ – being considered more a seaman – as opposed to a gunnery, torpedo or other specialist.”<sup>5</sup>*

As a Commander, Tozer was Executive Officer of the 6-inch Cruiser *HMAS Adelaide*, escorting the first convoy of Second AIF and NZ troops destined for the Middle East. He returned to *HMAS Adelaide* in 1943-44 as Executive Officer, followed by five months as Commanding Officer and Commander Task Force 71.4. Fred Cooper, an 18 year old Stoker in 1943, recalled the day Tozer was first welcomed aboard *HMAS Adelaide* as Commanding Officer:

*“Captain Esdaile was a rather remote and aloof type, whereas Tozer was rather the opposite. He was well liked by Adelaide’s lower deck ratings. When he first came on board, he was given the customary bosun’s pipe for senior officers,*

and he asked for them to restrain from this custom when he was boarding, or going ashore, in future.”<sup>6</sup>

Cooper recalled the difference in Tozer’s leadership compared to his more rigidly formal predecessors:

*“I remember one Saturday, myself and three mates were on shore leave, having been ‘sampling’ beers in several Fremantle pubs since midday, decided to catch a bus to Perth, this was about 4pm, and it would be fair to say we were in a carefree mood. Whilst waiting at the bus stop, a sedan car pulls up, and a voice said ‘Want a lift lads?’ I jumped in the front and my three mates got in the back. The driver turned out to be our new captain in civvies. Of course we were rather taken aback as we had caps flat aback, jacket sleeves un-buttoned and turned back, and a little the worse for wear. He never said a word about our sloppy appearance and was most friendly ... In the navy in those days officers and ratings only spoke when it was official duties so the gap between the two was rather wide.”<sup>7</sup>*

### **HMAS Melville, 1941-42**

Commander Tozer first came to Darwin on 11 December 1941 as Commanding Officer of HMAS Melville (Naval Headquarters), at which time Captain Edward Penry Thomas OBE RN was Naval Officer in Charge (NOIC). Tozer had as his Secretary Pay Lieutenant Trevor Rapke RANVR, who some years later became Judge Advocate General of the Navy. In his recollections of life in Darwin, one of Tozer’s Petty Officers refers to Tozer affectionately as ‘the Captain’ and as ‘our Captain’.<sup>8</sup>

Tozer’s first responsibility, in reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor and expectations of a similar attack on Darwin, was to facilitate a Cabinet direction for the immediate evacuation of women and children from Darwin. Tozer was present in Darwin on the morning of 19 February 1942 when the town and harbour were targeted by Japanese bombers, while the RAAF base was specifically targeted in the follow-up raid at midday. Despite some early criticism of the Navy, the Royal Commissioner Mr Justice Lowe subsequently reported: “Captain Thomas, the Senior Naval Officer in Darwin, anticipated that such an attack would take place. The Navy, in my opinion, had taken all proper steps in preparation for such an attack”.<sup>9</sup>

Tozer was no stranger to enemy air attack. In 1940-41, he had been Executive Officer of HMAS Hobart on duty with Red Sea Force in the Mediterranean, shelling port installations in Berbera, British Somaliland, and the vanguard of the Italian invasion force, when she had suffered bombing attacks by Italian aircraft. In Darwin on the afternoon of 19 February, Tozer addressed his Petty Officers and told them that the Navy would remain in town while the Army would dig-in at the 14-mile, and that the care of all ships in the port had been turned over to the Navy. Tozer further gave his Petty Officers clear direction on their tasks for the next 24 hours:

*“No army personnel or civilians at the Army base will be allowed to leave the camp so the town should be deserted. The code word will be ‘Waltzing Matilda’ and every person encountered by the patrols will be challenged. The Gunner’s Mate will detail three patrols of four men, with a PO in charge, and state the challenge procedure. These patrols will*

*move out at 1800 and return to base at 0600. Tomorrow, unless the situation changes, working parties will commence to clean up the town and arrange the burials of those persons killed.”<sup>10</sup>*

Tozer detailed one group to the hospital to patrol from the center of town towards the harbour. Another group would be responsible for the rest of the town area and a third patrol would secure the docks area and the signal station. He directed that rifles were to be fired to summons assistance.

Commodore Cuthbert Pope RAN arrived in Darwin on 20 February as the new NOIC and the following day the Navy took full control of all facilities between Bennett Street and the port. Another veteran has recalled that lower deck was cleared at Naval Headquarters in Mitchell Street and Commodore Pope addressed the men regarding the expected invasion of Australia:

*“As RAN personnel defending your native land, you are as of now expendable. You will defend this, The Fortress Area, to the last man. As NOIC HMAS Melville, this is an order as the Invasion of Australia is deemed inevitable. The Army has withdrawn to a defence position known as the Brisbane Line. The Navy is all that is between that line and the forces of the Imperial Army and Navy of Japan.”<sup>11</sup>*

As directed by Commander Tozer, that evening naval ratings were cleaning up the ships and wharf and, as expected, there were high level bombing runs the following day. Bill Bracht, one of Melville’s Petty Officers, recalled Tozer’s response: “As it was now evident that the Japs were trying to render the docks inoperative, our Captain decided it was too dangerous to have anybody working on the ships in daylight.”<sup>12</sup>

The raids continued on a regular basis, and by 26 February the night parties had unloaded all ships and all burials had been completed. In documenting the history of that fateful day and its aftermath, Douglas Lockwood recorded:

*“The Royal Australian Navy did much that morning in helping defend the port and rescue survivors. The behaviour of the RAN sailors was exemplary and forms one of the more creditable aspects of the overall story.”<sup>13</sup>*

### **Looting**

The Army came under much criticism for the unchecked looting and systematic theft which occurred following the raids, and the civil police stood by helplessly, believing that martial law had been proclaimed. Lockwood spoke of the, “attempted dictatorship by the military policemen whose only authority was a uniform and an armband”.<sup>14</sup> Many servicemen went to the harbour and, for a small fee, sent their ‘loot’ south in a small ship.<sup>15</sup>

One person however, did do something in response to this situation. In establishing a patrol program around the town area and the docks, Commander Tozer was concerned as much about a Japanese landing as he was of sabotage and looting within the largely deserted town. He gave his Petty Officers a very clear mission for the night of 19/20 February: “The Navy will patrol the town tonight to prevent any looting or sabotage”.<sup>16</sup> The Administrator, the Honourable Aubrey Abbott, later reported:

"An instance of the prevalence of looting is that when the Royal Commission appointed to investigate the air raid was taking evidence in Darwin from 5 to 10 March, soldiers, at that very time, were taking refrigerators, wireless sets, sewing machines and clothing in Army lorries to the wharf and selling them to sailors on the motor vessel Yochow for cigarettes and tobacco. Captain L E Tozer, RAN, saw what was going on, and the police at Brisbane, which was the vessel's destination, were informed. When the ship arrived she was boarded by the police, who were able to prevent most of the stolen property from being thrown into the Brisbane River by the crew when they found the ship was to be searched. Twenty members of the crew were convicted."<sup>17</sup>



### Honours

Sir Zelman Cowen observed: "while there were some who performed poorly, the record also shows that there were men and women who displayed heroism and high courage".<sup>18</sup> There were 27 decorations awarded for bravery and devotion to duty in Darwin on 19 February 1942, of which 15 were to Naval personnel.<sup>19</sup> Commander Laurance Tozer was one of twelve personnel Mentioned-in-Despatches (all Naval personnel): "For courage and devotion to duty whilst serving in HMAS Melville during an air raid on Darwin on 19 February 1942".<sup>20</sup> Bill Cook recalls that Tozer had already demonstrated his determination and bravery in the 1930s while serving on HMAS Australia (II):

*"There was drama in the Pacific Ocean when an American privately owned schooner sent out an SOS during very bad weather. We went to her aid and 'Pup' took away a volunteer lifeboat's crew - in a 12-oared 32-foot cutter - to bring off the bulk of her crew."*<sup>21</sup>

In Darwin a decade later, for his exemplary conduct, "throughout the period succeeding that during which the Air Raid was in progress", the name of Commander Tozer was brought before the Australian Naval Board:

*"This Officer has displayed exceptional zeal and considerable powers of leadership in connection with implementing the Emergency Organisation of the Port which has become necessary in the absence of a Jetty and other facilities, and he was largely responsible for preventing the total destruction by fire of SS Barossa. I consider him to be deserving of recognition for outstanding qualities of command, leadership, zeal and devotion to duty."*<sup>22</sup>

SS Barossa was an Adelaide Steamship Company freighter which had berthed in Darwin Harbour inside the wharf.<sup>23</sup> On the outer berth was MV Neptuna loaded with explosives and depth charges, with HMAS Swan on her seaward side, and moored on Barossa's seaward side was a naval oil lighter. The first three Japanese bombs landed in the

shallow water on the shore side of Barossa, quickly followed by direct hits on the wharf, Neptuna and Barossa. Barossa and Neptuna then became infernos, fed by the ruptured oil pipeline; Neptuna was about to explode and Barossa was trapped in its position.

On Tozer's direction, Warrant Officer Andrew Gibson RANR(S) took the naval tug Wato quickly alongside and pulled the lighter clear, and then attempted to pull the Barossa clear from Neptuna. As Wato took up the strain the line broke, and then Neptuna exploded. Chunks of red-hot metal from Neptuna showered down, and fires broke out on Barossa's decks, although she and Wato survived the massive explosion. Tozer then directed the crew of HMAS Tolga in fighting the fires on Barossa and brought them under control. Due to these prompt actions, no lives were lost onboard SS Barossa.

### HMAS Melville, 1942-43

Following the re-establishment of control in Darwin, the Navy took full control of all facilities between Bennett Street and the port. On 1 October, Naval Headquarters HMAS Melville was established in the old stone courthouse and police station buildings on the corner of the Esplanade and Smith Street, overlooking Darwin Harbour. Commander Tozer commanded HMAS Melville throughout 1942, and was present during 49 further Japanese air raids in the Darwin region.<sup>24</sup> He developed a good working relationship with the various other Service elements; of particular interest, on 21 October 1942 the men of the 2/14th Australian Field Regiment commemorated 'Trafalgar Day' by calling on Commander Tozer and drinking 'Nelson's Blood'. It is recorded that a salute of two rounds of grapeshot was fired.<sup>25</sup>

By June 1943, medical supplies were arriving in Darwin, more general supplies were also coming through and better meals were available. Because of the hot weather, the incessant enemy threat and the inability to respond effectively, men were still losing weight and morale was practically non-existent. Towards the end of Commander Tozer's term as Commanding Officer, in an effort to increase morale, HMAS Melville produced a magazine titled *The "Buzz". Doings in Darwin*. Issued in early August 1943, this inaugural issue carried a 'Message of Goodwill' from Commander Tozer.

### NOIC Darwin and CO HMAS Melville, 1945-46

Tozer returned to Naval Headquarters in Darwin in 1945, as Acting Commanding Officer from 12 February. He was then Commanding Officer and NOIC Darwin from 23 March, as an Acting Captain. Accordingly, he resided at the NOIC's Residence ('Admiralty House'), on the corner of the Esplanade and Peel Street. This historic building was later

relocated to the site where it now stands, on the corner of Knuckey Street and the Esplanade.

To Captain Tozer fell the task of coordinating the last act of war in northern Australia, the Japanese surrender of Timor. A convoy led by *HMAS Moresby* left Darwin Harbour and at midday on 11 September, on the quarter-deck of *HMAS Moresby* in Koepang Harbour, the Instrument of Surrender was signed by Colonel Kaida Tatsuichi, commander of the 48th Japanese Division. Captain Tozer recorded in the War Diary <sup>26</sup> *HMAS Melville's* part in this operation, known as Operation TOFO. The 12th/40th Battalion made up the bulk of 'Timor Force' under Brigadier Lewis Dyke, which went ashore on 12 September. Captain Tozer himself disembarked from *HMAS Moresby* on 12 September 1945, supervised the establishment of a Port Directorate, and returned to *HMAS Melville* on 14 September.

Tozer then represented the Navy in discussions associated with the post-war reconstruction of Darwin, and here came into conflict with the Town Planner McInnis and the Northern Territory Administrator, Aubrey Abbott. Following the evacuation of Darwin, the Navy had taken full control of all facilities between Bennett Street and the port and *HMAS Melville* had become a major establishment, occupying several premises in central Darwin.

Abbott very clearly intended that Darwin should not develop as a garrison town<sup>27</sup>, and McInnis cut across the wartime zones occupied by the military. In the immediate post-war expansion of Darwin, as central real estate became more valuable, the Navy gave up some of these facilities and relocated them to the Transmitting Station Coonawarra. However, Tozer insisted that the Bennett Street area should remain allocated purely for naval use.<sup>28</sup>

The senior military officer, Major-General Allen, similarly opposed the civil resumption of the land occupied by Navy, and there arose a clear delineation between Abbott/McInnis, the various departmental bureaucrats, and the military. Abbott called the Naval position totally unreasonable and totally beyond post-war requirements, although himself exaggerating Navy's stance:

*"I must say that I entirely fail to grasp the point that it is essential to hold land and keep it vacant for half a century because it might be required at the end of that time for possible war expansion."* <sup>29</sup>

Following the death of Prime Minister Curtin, the Department of Post-War Reconstruction was created, which caused conflict between the Minister for Post-War Reconstruction and the Minister for the Interior, who was responsible for the Northern Territory. Cabinet deemed the rebuilding of Darwin to be the responsibility of both departments, so an Inter-Departmental Committee was established, which in turn established a sub-committee, which led to the involvement of the Department of Works and Housing – a stroke of "midsummer madness" according to Abbott.<sup>30</sup> The Department of Works and Housing produced a new Darwin Town Plan in January 1946, which was adopted by Cabinet on 18 January.

Abbott blamed the Navy completely for the failure of the original McInnis Town Plan, opposing its intention to construct a Naval barracks where Abbott himself wanted to build an impressive civic centre.<sup>31</sup> In a letter, Tozer accused

Abbott of, "acting like a bosom companion to his face, and writing letters which were absolutely untrue behind his back".<sup>32</sup> Abbott departed the Territory in May 1946, and Tozer's appointment with *HMAS Melville* ceased on 11 December 1946. The next Administrator, Arthur Driver, oversaw the reconstruction of Darwin but for various bureaucratic reasons little happened and by 1950 there had still been practically no progress.

### Irony

The Naval occupation of the land on the toe of the Darwin Peninsula, seaward from Bennett Street to the wharf, was finally ended – not by Canberra or the Northern Territory Administration but by nature instead. On 25 December 1974, Cyclone Tracy destroyed both the *Coonawarra* Transmitting Station and the main buildings of Naval Headquarters, *HMAS Melville*. At the height of the storm, Captain Eric Johnston OBE RAN (NOCNA) and three of his staff were trapped under collapsing debris. Johnston then led the Navy's clean-up effort, for which he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia. *HMAS Melville* was decommissioned on 21 August 1975, and a re-built *HMAS Coonawarra* became the centre of Naval activity in the Top End. <sup>33</sup>

The damaged buildings of *HMAS Melville* stood vacant for nearly six years before a contract was awarded to restore the structure to its original appearance. At the end of 1981, on the seventh anniversary of Cyclone Tracy, the buildings were officially opened by the Chief Minister.<sup>34</sup> At the end of the war, these buildings had figured prominently in the dispute between the Administrator (Abbott) and the Navy (Tozer) over occupation of the lands between



Bennett Street and the wharf. In documenting the history of town planning in Darwin, Eve Gibson observed: "Given the history of the disputed area, there is some irony in the fact that the building now serves as the office of the Administrator of the Northern Territory."<sup>35</sup>

That the buildings were rebuilt to be the new Administrator's Office may indeed be ironic. But a greater irony perhaps lies in the fact that the first occupant of the rebuilt facility, the thirteenth Administrator of the Northern Territory, was in fact a retired Naval officer, Commodore Eric Johnston AM OBE – who had been the senior naval representative in Darwin and an occupant of Admiralty House, as earlier had Laurance Tozer.

Tozer's final naval appointment was as Chief Staff Officer to the Flag Officer in Command *HMAS Sydney* (1946-48), and he transferred to the Retired List on 27 May 1948. The following year he was granted the War Service rank of Captain, and in 1956 his name was removed from the Navy List. Tozer lived in Perth in the years following the war, and died in the Repatriation General Hospital at Hollywood, WA on 15 May 1978 at the age of 76. A private service was held in the Crematorium Chapel in Fremantle on 18 May, and he was buried in the Anglican Section of the Fremantle Cemetery. <sup>36</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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*Paul Rosenzweig is a graduate of the Northern Territory University, with a Master of Arts in Southeast Asian Studies. He is a non-professional historian, awarded the 2001 Centenary Medal for "long and outstanding research into Australia's military history". Paul served in the Army Reserve for 20 years from 1979, and as a commissioned officer from 1985: he commanded the Defence Force Careers Reference Centre in Darwin, and was a squadron commander in the North West Mobile Force. In his civilian employment, he was Aide to the Administrator of the Northern Territory from 1991 to 1997. He then served in the Australian Regular Army for 12 years with the rank of Major, which included service in East Timor, and the Republic of the Philippines.*



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## Notes

1. The Rt Hon Sir Zelman Cowen AK GCMG GCVO QC DCL, Address for the commemoration service at the Darwin Cenotaph, 19 February 2002.
2. Rosenzweig (1994). Ed: now researched as 235 deaths.
3. Rt Hon Sir Zelman Cowen, Commemoration address at the Darwin Cenotaph, 19 February 1992.
4. Cunningham (1988) p.122; Eldridge (1949) p.262, 433-434.
5. Captain W F Cook RAN (retd), pers comm, 3 August and 15 August 2001.
6. Mr F Cooper, pers comm, 2 April 2002.
7. Ibid.
8. Bracht, pp.169-170.
9. Lowe (1942a and 1942b).
10. Bracht, pp.169-170.
11. Phillips (1983).
12. Bracht, p.171.
13. Ibid.
14. Lockwood (1984) pp.168-169.
15. Hall pp.127-139; Lowe (1942a), p.11; Royal Commission evidence by C L A Abbott, 25 March 1942 (NAA: Series A816/1, item 37/301/293).
16. Bracht, pp.169-170.
17. Abbott (1950) p.94. See also Hall (1980) p.135, and Lockwood (1984) p.169.
18. Rt Hon Sir Zelman Cowen, Commemoration service at Darwin Cenotaph, 19 February 2002.
19. Distinguished Service Medal (1), British Empire Medal (2) and Mentioned-in-Despatches (12). See Atkinson (1986) and Bradford (2000).
20. Third Supplement to The London Gazette, 1 September 1942, p.3818.
21. Captain W F Cook RAN (retd), pers comm, 3 August 2001.
22. Commodore C J Pope RAN, Commodore-in-Charge, Darwin, Nomination to the Secretary of the Australian Naval Board, NT142/42, 448/201/1403, dated 20 March 1942.
23. Abbott (1950), pp.82, 87; Griffiths (1947) pp.79-81; Hall (1980) p.48-49; Lewis (1999) p.35; Lockwood (1984), pp.45-55, 70-74.
24. Up to 6 August 1943: excludes the various raids outside of Darwin town - on Hughes, Livingstone and Pell airfields, Batchelor, Cox Peninsula, Noonamah and Katherine.
25. Rayner (2001) p.74.
26. A/Captain L E Tozer RAN, HMAS Melville War Diary, quarter ended 31/3/46 (AWM: Series AWM78, 400/2, RAN Administrative Authority-Darwin Naval Base-HMAS Melville-Reports of Proceedings (War Diary), 1941-45).
27. See Gibson (1997).
28. NAA: ACT 816, item 2/301/407 Memorandum, p.2 (see Gibson 1997, pp.46-48).
29. NAA: ACT CRS, A5954 Box 607, C L A Abbott to the Secretary, Department of the Interior, 22 February 1945, quoted by Gibson (1997) p.48.
30. Abbott (1950) p.106.
31. NAA: ACT CRS F1, 66/4454, C L A Abbott to the Secretary, Department of the Interior, 26 January 1946, quoted by Gibson (1997) p.51.
32. NAA: Vic MP 1584 File 342A, letter dated 22 February 1946, quoted by Gibson (1997) p.51.
33. Ed; to further clarify. The shore base HMAS Coonawarra was the Communications facility located down the Stuart Highway near Berrimah. It had a section inside the Army's Larrakeyah Barracks in town for its ships and maintenance facilities. In the early 21st century the land component became a facility of the ADF; the Army established a new base at Robertson Barracks near Palmerston, and the Navy continued and enlarged its facilities in town.
34. See Carment (1996) and Rosenzweig (1996).
35. Gibson (1997) p.60.
36. The West Australian, 19 May 1978.