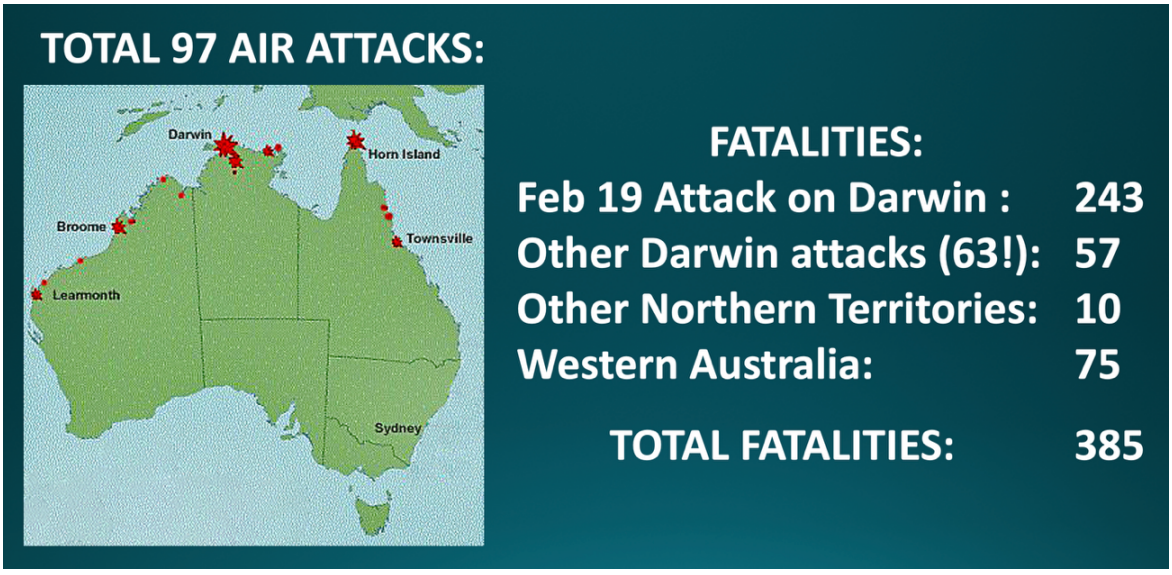
1942: THE ATTACK ON DARWIN Dr. John Freedman

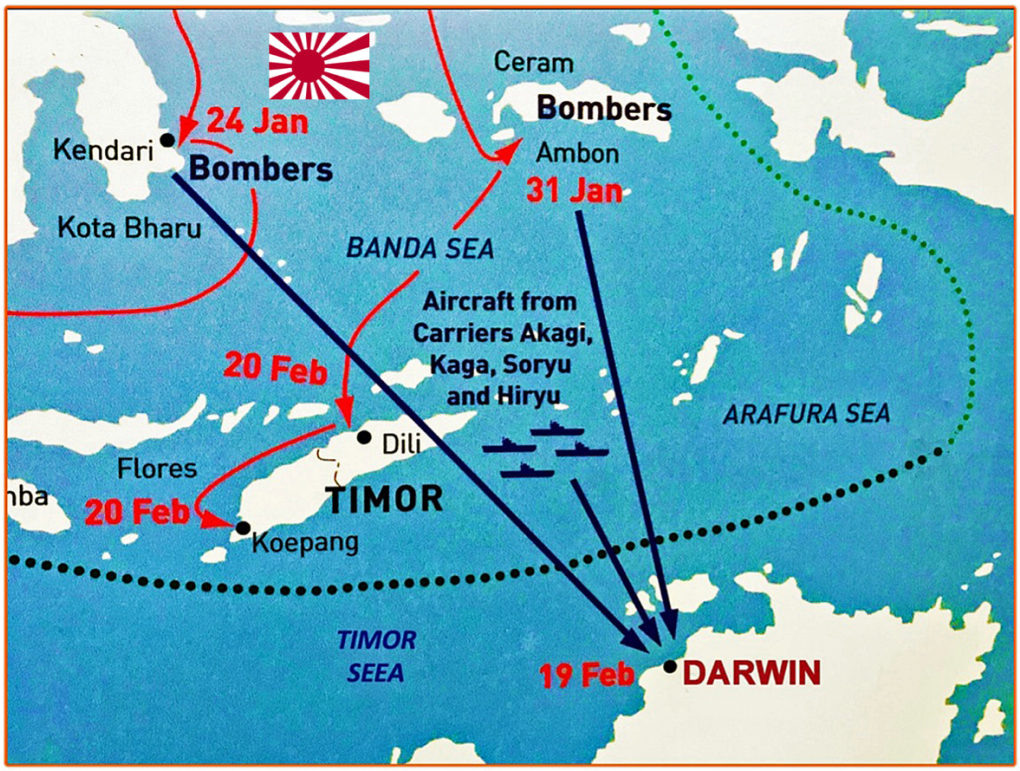
On Feb 19, 1942, the Japanese launched their ferocious air Attack on Darwin. 188 planes attacked at 9:58am followed by a 2nd wave of 54 aircraft at 11:45am. Not well-known is that the infamous attack was but **one of 64 attacks on the city**, among a **total of 97 Japanese bombing attacks on Australia** from **Feb 1942 to Nov 1943**, including attacks on Broome in Western Australia, and Townsville and Cairns in Queensland. This does not include torpedo attacks on Australian ports by Japanese submarines. Below is a list of some of the key bombing raids:

Location	Date	Details
Darwin, Northern Territory	**19 Feb 1942**	**First and largest raid: 188 aircraft from 4c arriers (*Akagi, Kaga, Hiryū, Sōryū*) bombed the harbor, town, and airfields in 2 waves. 54 land-based bombers followed. 243 dead, 8 ships and 20 aircraft lost.**
Broome, Western Australia	**3 March**	Strafing and bombing of airfield and harbor by 8 fighters; **70 killed,** mostly civilians and refugees.
Wyndham, Western Australia	3 March	Simultaneous raid with Broome: 8 fighters strafed the town and airfield.
Broome, Western Australia	20 March	Second raid on Broome: Bombing and strafing of airfield.
Derby, Western Australia	20 March	Bombing of the town and airfield.
Horn Island, **Queensland**	14 March	First of several raids on the airfield; continued sporadically until Aug '42.
Townsville, Queensland	25–29 July	3 night raids
Mossman (Cairns), Queensland	30–31 July	Single bomb dropped
Darwin, Northern Territory	**12 Nov 1943**	**Final major raid on Darwin** (#64) targeted fuel tanks

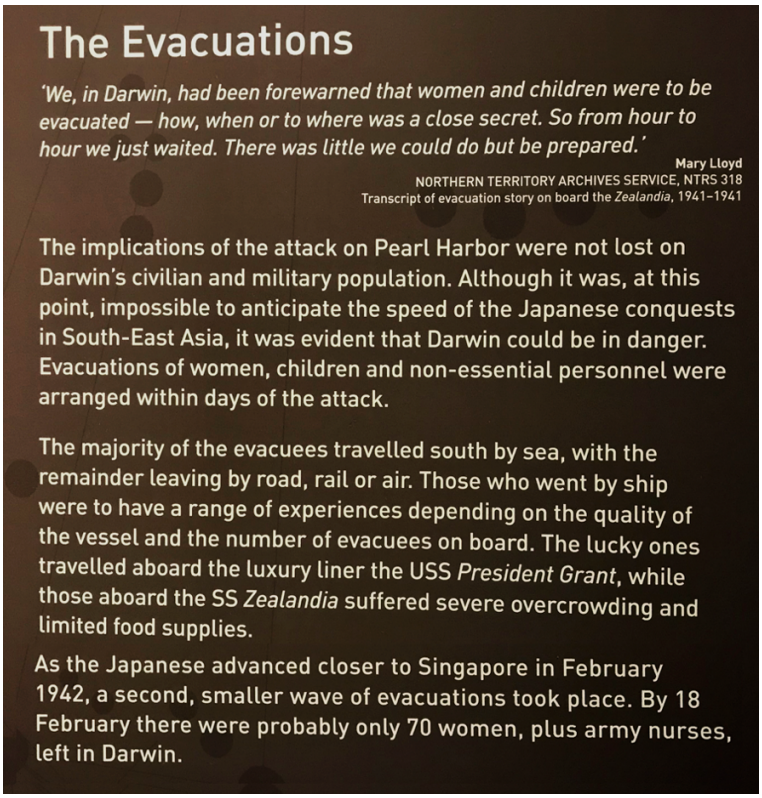
385 died plus thousands were wounded - mostly Australian but also a significant number of American military personnel stationed in Australia - in the Japanese bombings of Australia:



The attack on Darwin is well-documented in the excellent exhibit at the **Darwin Military Museum** and I highly recommend a visit for those so inclined. Here are some key infographics from the museum:



Darwin was a key Allied strategic asset as a port, airbase, staging post and intelligence hub - and unlike Pearl Harbor, an attack on Darwin was expected and was preceded by evacuations.



The Evacuations

'We, in Darwin, had been forewarned that women and children were to be evacuated — how, when or to where was a close secret. So from hour to hour we just waited. There was little we could do but be prepared.'

Mary Lloyd
NORTHERN TERRITORY ARCHIVES SERVICE, NTRS 318
Transcript of evacuation story on board the *Zealandia*, 1941–1941

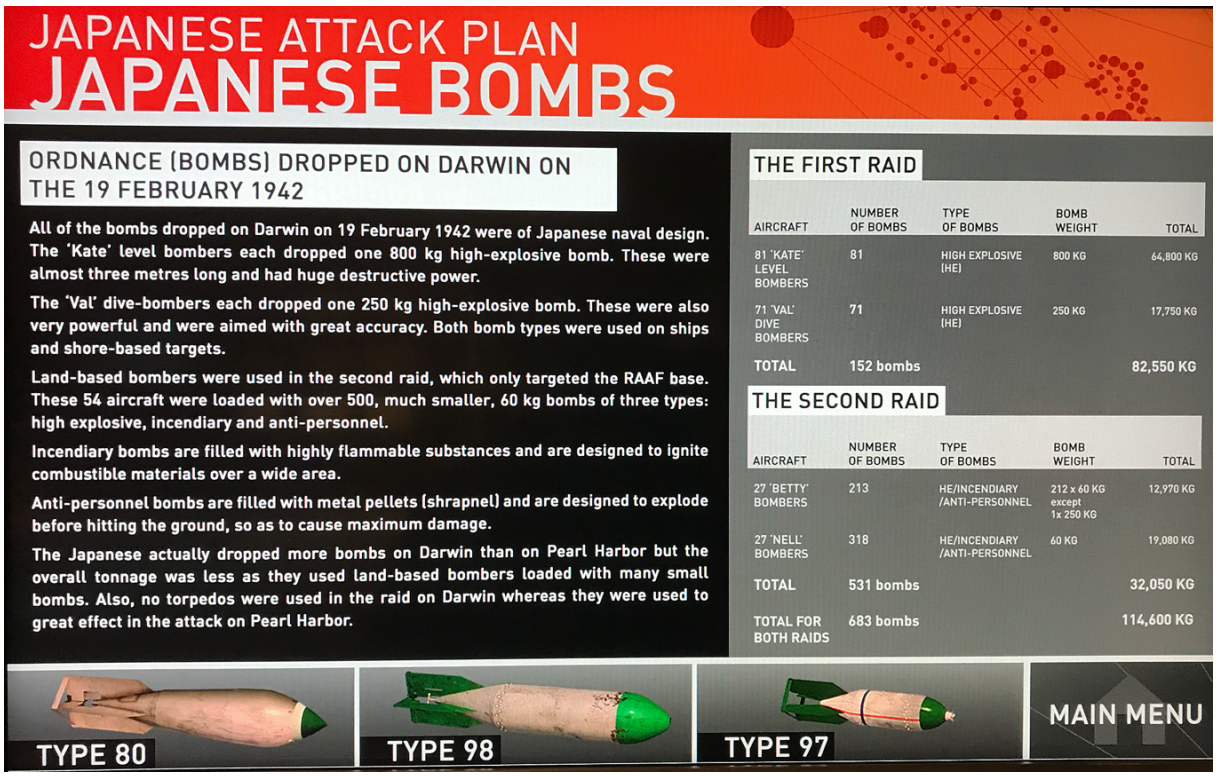
The implications of the attack on Pearl Harbor were not lost on Darwin's civilian and military population. Although it was, at this point, impossible to anticipate the speed of the Japanese conquests in South-East Asia, it was evident that Darwin could be in danger. Evacuations of women, children and non-essential personnel were arranged within days of the attack.

The majority of the evacuees travelled south by sea, with the remainder leaving by road, rail or air. Those who went by ship were to have a range of experiences depending on the quality of the vessel and the number of evacuees on board. The lucky ones travelled aboard the luxury liner the USS *President Grant*, while those aboard the SS *Zealandia* suffered severe overcrowding and limited food supplies.

As the Japanese advanced closer to Singapore in February 1942, a second, smaller wave of evacuations took place. By 18 February there were probably only 70 women, plus army nurses, left in Darwin.



MORE BOMBS WERE DROPPED ON DARWIN THAN ON PEARL HARBOR (though total tonnage was less)



The Attack on Darwin Feb 19, 1942 and other attacks in March signaled clear Japanese intent to target Australia and would therefore play a key role in the Allied decision to thwart the Japanese invasion of nearby Port Moresby in New Guinea in the pivotal Battle of the Coral Sea, May 4-8, 1942.
(see my separate handout: '**THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA: A LASTING LEGACY**')