

**An account of the bombing of Darwin, as witnessed by Mick Tunnecliffe,
19th February 1942**

On that fateful day in 1942, I was working at Francis Bay for contractors, D.S. Hunt, who were excavating stone from the hillside. These workings were to become munitions and explosives storage for the armed forces. It was a clear day, with the only movement in the sky coming from an occasional flight of American Kittyhawks. This was the first day I had seen them in the skies around Darwin.

At "smoko" time myself and the other workers were sitting on the hillside overlooking the bay, when I noticed several flights of planes coming in across the harbour, heading directly towards the wharf. I immediately thought they were more Americans coming in. It was then I noticed masses of small black objects falling from the planes towards the wharf. I could not believe my eyes as the wharf, oil tanks and town started to explode and massive clouds of black smoke started to billow into the air.

As we started to realise what was happening, we also became very aware of our work area being next to an explosives store and this was not such a good place to be. We all jumped in the work car and drove to the main road, not quite knowing what we were going to do. As we reached the road, a Kittyhawk roared over the top of us. On its tail was a Zero with guns blazing away. I just stood and stared as the two planes disappeared into the distance. Someone said later the Kittyhawk had come down in the botanical gardens.

My father was the quarry manager and our quarters were in the quarry further along the road. I drove down to this area, which was on a hillside overlooking the mangroves and the bay. At the quarry, I stopped and looked across the bay towards the town and wharf area. Tied up at the wharf, in clear view, was the *Neptuna*, loaded with mines and explosives. As I watched, the *Neptuna* blew apart. It is one of the most vivid memories I have. Within seconds a massive wave of heat and air hit me like a giant fan. It was so severe, I battled to stay on my feet. A giant column of smoke went swirling into the air. It must have gone up for thousands of feet. As the smoke from the *Neptuna* rose high in the sky, the heat forced it out into a mushroom-like cloud, something I wasn't to see again until the newsreels of the A-bomb tests in the 1950's.

As a curious 18-year-old, I was keen to see what had happened. I grabbed my bike and rode the two miles around into town. As I rode through China Town, down Cavanagh Street to the Esplanade, I saw that Mook Sang's general store had been completely wrecked. Although I did not see any fire in the town itself, the destruction and desolation was everywhere. There was glass from broken windows and rubble strewn across the ground. Steel plates, probably from the *Neptuna*, lay crumpled in the streets. I rode on around to the post-office, dodging rocks, holes and assorted debris. At what was once the post office, there were now bomb craters 20 feet across and 10 feet deep. At the steps of the post office I picked up a piece of shrapnel, which I still have to this day. Around town there were military personnel scurrying everywhere, however, nobody took any notice of me as I rode on past the Darwin Hotel and over to the cliff top along the Esplanade. The sight was one I will never forget, as I was just in time to see the bow of an American destroyer, *USS Peary*, lift straight into the air, then slide down under the blue waters of the harbour. Darwin harbour seemed full of wrecked and burning ships. Some had gone to the bottom already, with just their masts showing above the water. It was then the air-raid sirens sounded again. I quickly convinced myself the town area was no place to be, and rode back to the quarry as fast as I could.

From the quarry I saw the second wave come in across the Bagot area, where they dropped what seemed to be "belly tanks", which tumbled down like torpedoes. The planes continued on to the RAAF base, where they then unloaded their bombs. Although this was some distance from my vantage point at the quarry, the ground across to the base was flat and covered with low scrub. This allowed me to see the tops of the explosions as the bombs hit. By this time the sky had become peppered with puffs of smoke, as the ack-ack guns tried to find a target. The ack-ack seemed high and although they appeared to be throwing everything at the Japanese planes, I did not see any of them hit.

Everyone was talking about the raid that night. The next day I rode my bike back into town, but didn't get very far before being ordered out. The army had taken over the town area. Everything had been closed. There were many rumours about what had happened and normal life in Darwin had come to a standstill. That afternoon we decided to leave town. With a drum of fuel tied to the back of the car, we left the bitumen four miles out of Darwin and headed South along the dusty track. We saw no other vehicles on the road South, as most people had left before us. When we reached Adelaide River we were sidetracked into an area crowded with cars recently driven from Darwin. As people milled around, an air-raid siren wailed and we were all told to get right away from the cars as they were likely to be a target. When we returned, we found the army had disabled all the cars by smashing the distributors. It seems they wanted all civilian traffic off the road. We were later transported by rail and army trucks to Alice Springs, then on to Adelaide by train. Eventually we arrived in Perth where I joined the army and within four months was stationed in New Guinea. The bombing of Darwin stands out in my mind as a very vivid picture of war arriving in Australia.

Best Wishes Mick Tunnecliffe (your Father)