

The Bombing of Government House



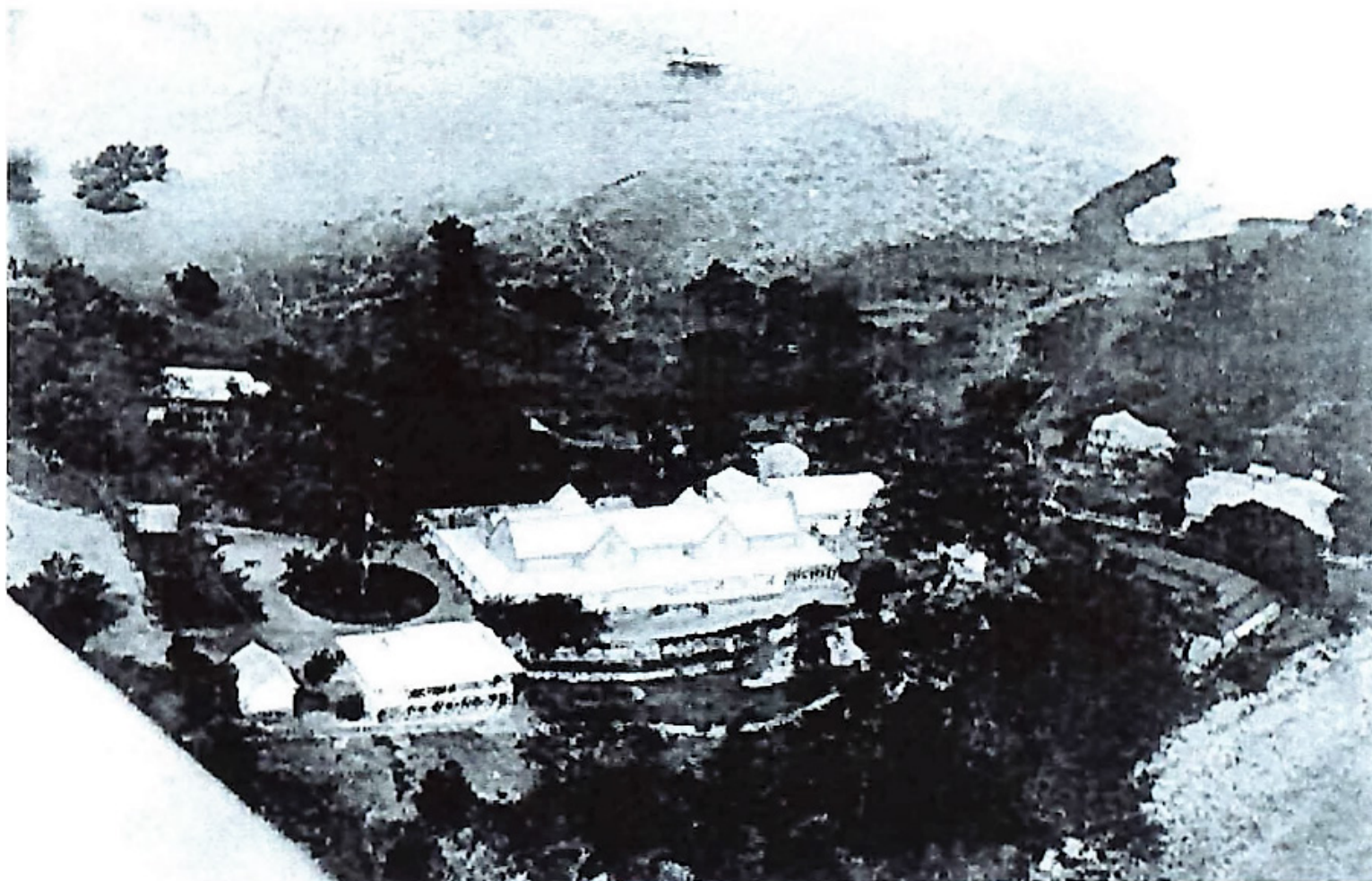
ARWIN JETTY.



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View from the west - January 1942 (Mrs H. Abbott)

Lead up

It was the 19th February, 1942. That day, the Administrator, Mr Charles Lydiard Aubrey Abbott and his wife, Hilda, had breakfast on the louvred verandah of Government House. From there, they could see out over their garden on the cliff across the harbour, to several military ships anchored at the wharf. They could see the red cross painted on the side of the hospital ship 'Manunda'. The 'Neptuna' was steaming across the harbour towards the wharf. The morning was clear but very humid after all the recent rain. Their staff had started work, including:

- o Elsie Kilmartin and Daisy Martin, their 18 year old Aboriginal housekeepers,
- o Charles See Kee, Mr Abbott's personal secretary,
- o Nicholas Kampur, their Russian chauffeur,
- o Nicholas' wife, Katherine, who was the cook,
- o Billy Shepherd, their Aboriginal gardener,
- o Billy's wife, Lucy, and
- o Midwei Alinggudum of the Maranangu tribe (named Leo Goodman), the maintenance man.

Mr Abbott and Mrs Abbott had both been overseas during World War 1. Mrs Abbott had worked for the Red Cross in Cairo and Mr Abbott had been an officer and was wounded in Egypt. In 1937, aged 55, Mr Abbott became the Administrator of the Northern Territory. By 1941, he had become so concerned that Darwin may soon be attacked or invaded by the Japanese that he had arranged for all his staff to shelter under his office if the need arose. His office was 30 metres away in the western grounds across the garden, near the side of the cliff. It was strongly built with concrete pillars supporting a concrete floor. Under the floor was a concrete strongroom with a thick iron door.



Above: Government House Offices.

Sirens

After breakfast, Mr Abbott attended a meeting in his office. It was nearly ten o'clock, when suddenly, loud sirens blared across Darwin city. Mrs Abbott and all of the staff ran across the lawn to the air raid shelter with small bags of essentials. As soon as they entered the shelter, a bomb exploded in the grounds of Government House, only about 15 metres from the office.

Mr Abbott described what happened to their shelter:

“The entire office structure seemed to rise in the air. The concrete floor above us lifted and the reinforced pillars snapped like dry sticks, then it settled down amid the crash and rumble of falling masonry and grey dust. The bomb obliterated half of the office, making a crater twenty feet deep and thirty feet wide.”

The staff of Government House all reached the shelter but their terror was not yet over. Mr Abbott wrote what happened next:

“The walls and floor were blown in and a huge block of concrete fell on Daisy, burying her from head to waist.”

Poor Daisy had been killed instantly. Leo was pinned by one leg and he called out in fright. Mr Abbott and Nicholas used crowbars to try and move large chunks of cement and clear the debris off him. Finally, after half an hour, they pulled Leo free. Everyone then scrambled down the cliff to take shelter away from Government House until the raids were over.



Above: Darwin Post Office and Postmaster's Residence.

Immediately After

After the raid, Mr Abbott inspected the office and it was only then that he realised how lucky they had been. During the blast, the big steel door had swung open and jammed under one corner of the concrete floor, holding it up. It was the only thing that had stopped it from crashing down on top of them all. It had saved everyone from being crushed to death.

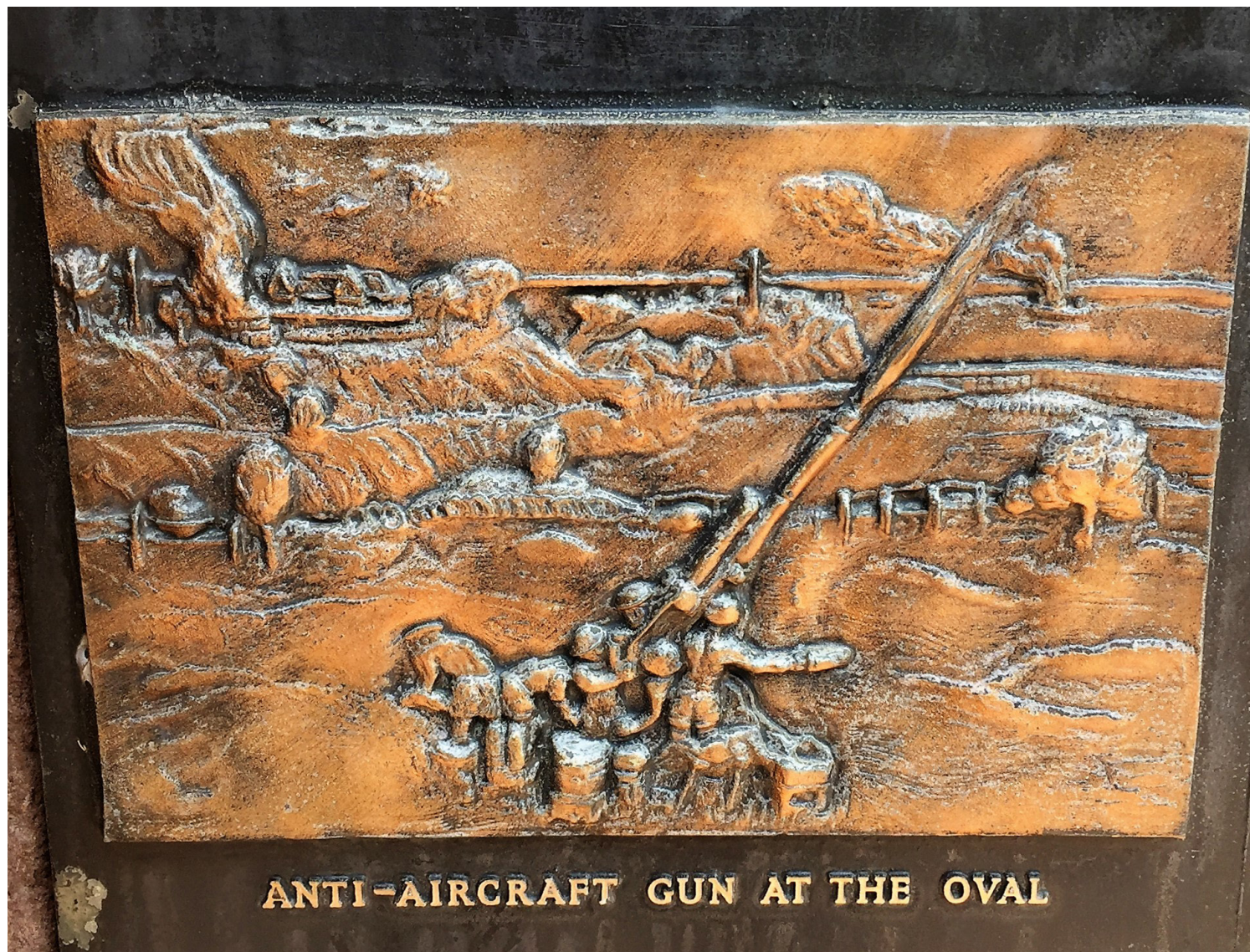
The Australian Flag

There was an Australian flag flying on a flagpole in the middle of the lawn. The Japanese fighter pilots continued to target Government House and each time they flew past, they tried to shoot the flag down. They fired at it over and over again until it became riddled with bullet holes. Eventually the largest white star was totally shot out, but the flag continued to fly.

The Post Office

The police barracks across the road from Government House had been sliced in half and the cottage next to it looked like a heap of match sticks. The road out from Government House was piled high with wreckage from the bomb blast so it was impossible to drive a car down the road.

Mr Abbott looked across the road to where the post office and the postmaster's residence was, but it too, was now a pile of rubble. A bomb had landed there too, and everyone had been killed. On that terrible morning, just two raids killed about 250 people in and around Darwin.



Left: Part of
the plaque near
Government
House, Darwin.

Mr Abbott's Response

The first visitor to Government House was the government secretary, Mr Leslie Giles. He was dripping blood from a bad wound on his forearm. The men met up with the military commander and the chief of the police, and arranged for a train to evacuate citizens.

Mrs Abbott took Katherine, Elsie and Leo in her car and drove to Adelaide River. Mr Abbott also gave her the tattered Australian flag. Just as they were about to drive off, the second Japanese air raid began. They all dived into a big drain with some navy men. One of the men gave Mrs Abbott a tin helmet. Bullets hit the mudguards and bonnet of the car. The people were shaken and scared but unhurt.

They continued the slow journey by car. On the way, they heard more air raid warnings and Mrs Abbott was terrified. It took all day to get to Adelaide River and they camped at a buffalo hunter's camp at Mt Bundy Station. They hid in a hole there and at 4 am the next morning, the group caught the train from Darwin that was headed to Alice Springs. On board were another 22 women, some wounded men, several nuns and many Aboriginal children, all escaping the bombing in Darwin.

Mr Abbot stayed for another two weeks to help and to organise more evacuations, then he joined Mrs Abbott in Alice Springs and continued to help the war effort from there.



Left:
Remembering
Daisy at
Government
House.

Graves

The civilians who were killed were first buried in makeshift graves at Kahlin Beach. Later they were moved to the Berrimah War Cemetery. After the war, they were again reinterred at the Adelaide River War Cemetery, 113 km south of Darwin.

Remembering those Lost

A marble plaque was erected in Adelaide to the memory of the ten people killed at the Darwin Post Office. Money for the memorial and for one to be erected at Darwin Post Office was collected by voluntary subscription from postal officers throughout the Commonwealth. The memorial to the Post Office workers, is still in the Post Office in Darwin City today.

There is also a plaque commemorating those killed in the bombing of Darwin at the entrance to the Darwin City Council offices. In Parliament House, there are bricks from a section of the Post Office wall on display near the library. There is also a piece of shrapnel from the bomb and a commemorative plaque.

Along the Esplanade, the names of all those killed in Darwin, are displayed on a commemorative wall near the Cenotaph.

In the Australian War Memorial, there is a painting done by Arthur Murch in 1943, of the ruins of the post office. Arthur Murch was a well-known painter at the time, who won the Archibald Prize in 1949.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART28076

Above: The hospital ship, 'Manunda'.

Resources

Adelaide Memorial

Barrier Miner (Broken Hill, NSW), 18 February 1954.

Adelaide River War Cemetery

<https://www.weekendnotes.com/bombing-of-darwin-ceremony/>

Daisy Martin

<http://www.ntlexhibit.nt.gov.au/exhibits/show/bod/roh/martin>

Darwin Post Office

The story of the bombing of Darwin can be read online at the Australian War Memorial site.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/1942-bombing-of-darwin>

<http://guides.naa.gov.au/records-about-northern-territory/part1/chapter4/4.3.aspx>

Government House Bombing

<https://ntl.nt.gov.au/story/bombing-darwin>

Mr and Mrs Abbott

<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/'And+the+Sphinx+smiled'+Aubrey+and+Hilda+Abbott%2c+Darwin-%2c+1937-46.-a0126849913>

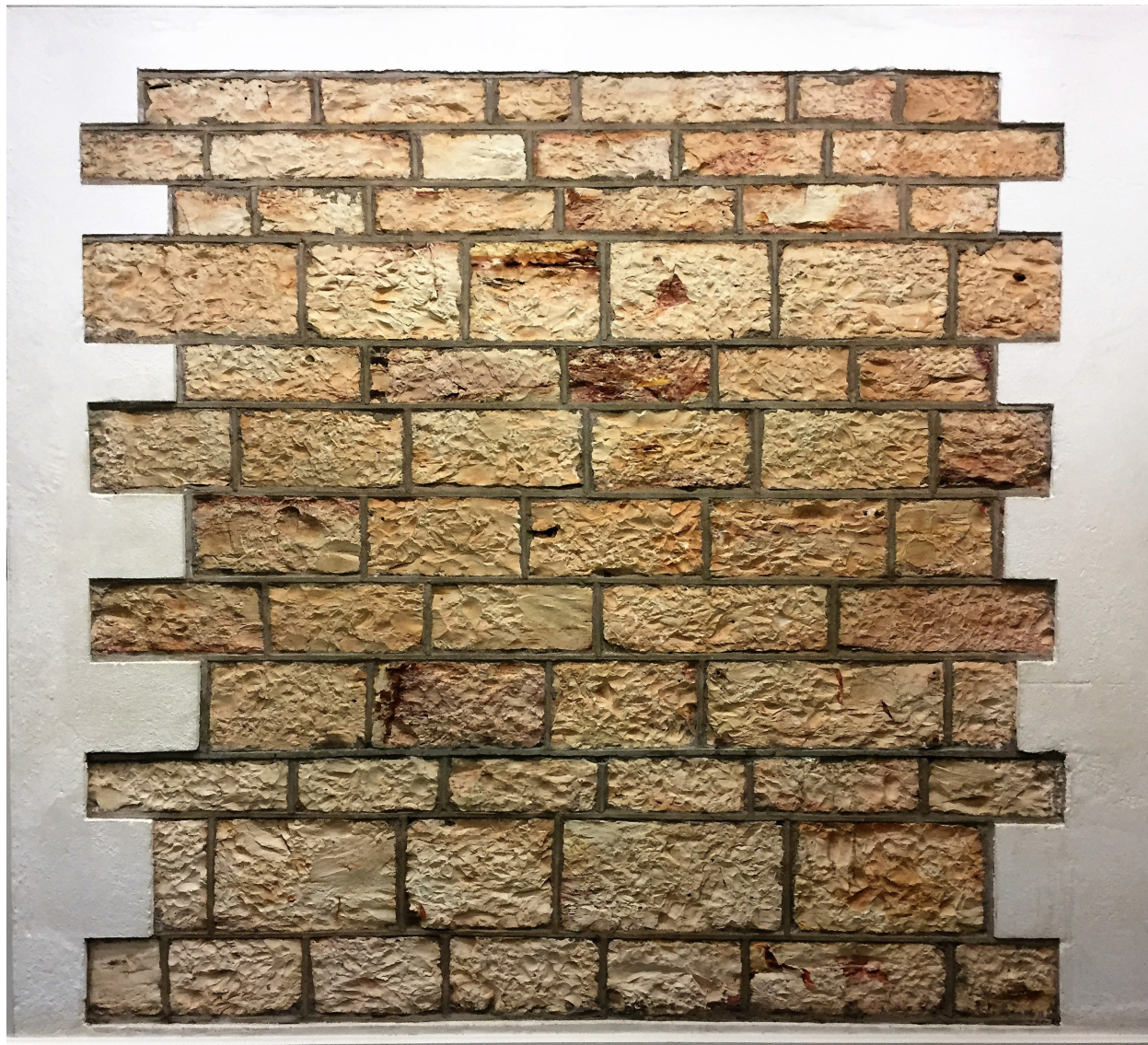
<https://northernterritory.com/articles/women-at-war>

Manunda

ANMM The Commons - Hospital ship MANUNDA in Sydney Harbour, 17th August 1940, No restrictions, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11962769>

Painting

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C176865>



Left: Bricks from the Darwin
Post Office, now at the
Northern Territory Library,
Darwin.

