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Darwin’s community has always been culturally diverse. On 19 February 1942, many peoples of Indigenous, Anglo, Celtic and Asian origins, including Japanese, were killed or wounded in the bombing. Some wounds would prove severe and of lasting physical and mental kinds. Quite possibly, too, the deaths and woundings of all Indigenous peoples weren’t recorded for different reasons. Aside from the survivors’ own traumas, there’s much I could say as to how the deaths and woundings in and around Darwin further affected others elsewhere who knew and cared for their people caught by surprise. Among the survivors were school-age young people who, with family and friends, mostly ‘headed south’ to Alice Springs and Adelaide, if possible. Aside, too, from those who witnessed the events for themselves and despite some reporting of Darwin’s bombing from the outset, the *extent* of death and devastation was kept secret from most Australians through different governments’ fear of national panic.

I’ve interviewed five people across many years who were school students at the time that news of Darwin spread. They all told me the above stories – but told me different ones, too. While my interviewees all lived in Victoria, their experiences are indicative of wider Australia. All were at primary school at the time, and in a mix of Government, independent and Catholic schools. I interviewed a woman who lived in Stawell, two women neighbours where I live now, a man who’s an historian - and my mother. Here are some of their stories.

All remembered male teachers from their schools enlisting, as well as more women teachers entering the profession to fill the vacancies. *Most of the primary teachers were men.* There’s no one Australia-wide record of all teachers who enlisted; plus, independent and Catholic schools have always written their own histories and I haven’t read all for today. But some States’ education departments collected records. For Victoria, this Education Department, Victoria, *War Service Record 1939-1945* [1], reveals that 1,775 Victorian Government school teachers enlisted across all of World War II. Most volunteered before Darwin’s bombing and some were there before it. Many more went to Darwin after it. By far the majority of teachers served across World War II in the Royal Australian Air Force with roles as diverse as mechanics on the ground, to intelligence activities in offices, to pilots of planes such as the one that just flew overhead. *Primary teacher men who’d never thought they’d fly.* And 19 women Victorian Government school teachers enlisted in women’s services. Seven served in the Women’s Australian Auxiliary Air Force with two as wireless telegraph officers, and one each of radar operator, signaller, photograph interpreter, physical education teacher and driver. Ten women served in the Australian Women’s Army Service with two in physical education, two in radar and one each in roles of searchlight battery, army education, radio, anti-aircraft location, signals and record-keeping at Victoria Barracks. One woman enlisted in the Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service as a telegraphist.

We might think students were pleased to see teachers leave and school disrupted, but by far most accounts assert that students were deeply worried for their teachers who were significant people in their lives. And with reason; of the 1,775 Victorian Government school teachers who enlisted, all women returned – but 123 men were killed on active service 1939-45 in the army, navy and air force, not counting the teachers who died early as a consequence of injuries after the war ended and who are not counted in this book. Many teachers also became prisoners-of-war in brutal camps across Asia. All up, too many teachers were incapable of returning to their peace-time professions because of physical and mental wounds.

But, of all things, this book tells me that ‘I’ was a student in schools in later years with three men who served in World War II and who survived to return to teaching. One was a Grade 2 teacher at my primary school in the 1960s, Mr Newell, who’d been a RAAF radar operator in Darwin after the bombing before being sent to New Guinea. I could never have guessed he’d been in the RAAF and in a war. He was tall, stately, intelligent and very calm - but he often wore blue. The other was the headmaster at my school at that same time who had served in the Army in Western Australia, Queensland and New Guinea, all of which were also bombed. Without notice, when I was in Grade 6, the headmaster would arrive at our classroom door in a track suit and announce to our teacher that he was taking us for Physical Training. Wearing full school uniforms which in winter included girls’ tunics, shirts, ties and jumpers, we were made run all the way from our desks to the oval and run two laps of it non-stop before doing star jumps and more. Mr Dare did all with us. We students would return to our rooms absolutely sweating while he would change back into his suit and tie. I’m not surprised to learn that Mr Dare was in the Army. And the principal at my high school several years later, as it turns out, is also in this book. Mr Rowney had served in the Army in New Guinea but served the school with a very gentle nature. I remember that a copy of this *Record of War Service* was on a special shelf in the school library – but no-one, not even Mr Rowney, himself, ever told us that he was in it or encouraged us to look within. Perhaps because the Vietnam War, which had been controversial in some sections of the community, had just concluded, ‘no-one mentioned any war’.

Of the interviewees, the male historian ‘never doubted victory’ because his father whom he deeply loved was in the Army and insisted in letters and when on leave that Australia would win. The father was a sergeant cook and was sent via Adelaide to Alice Springs after the bombing to feed defence force personnel in camps through to Darwin. The historian remembered his father bringing home souvenirs made by Aboriginal people and is saddened to this day not to know what happened to them in his family. His father also posted or gave him chewing gum from American forces stationed in northern Australia – and not just individual packets but whole boxes of many packets. The historian handed out chewing gum at his primary school and felt ‘very popular’.

One lady neighbour’s older brother was sent to Darwin after the bombing. In her lounge-room today she still displays a black and white photo of him in uniform. Although he died years ago, and not apparently because of the war, she prayed for him during her school’s prayers, at home at night, and still prays for him daily. She said the photo makes her feel, even now that he’s living with her. She and many students and teachers somehow kept working across their schooldays while in fear of not knowing if loved ones were well, wounded, suffering – or already dead.

That neighbour and the three other women I interviewed were scared after Darwin’s bombing for what might happen to them. They were less scared in daylight when at school with teachers and friends, but the Stawell woman and my mother both remembered being scared in bed at night in the dark. If they heard leaves rustling or a window shaking in wind, they hid under their beds or cried out to family that an enemy was outside.

At my mother’s school in cooking classes, the girls had always been taught ‘invalid cookery’ to make easy-to-eat foods, such as beef broths and chicken noodle soup, including for the unwell survivors in the community of WWI and for older relatives generally. But food rationing in Australia made these meals more common for everyone daily, plus there was thinking that girls would need to cook for a new generation of wounded or ill men. Even so, every now and then, the students mustered enough ingredients between them to make fruit cakes at school. The cakes were cooked in Australian-made Willow tins. They weren’t taken out of the cooking tins; rather, matching Willow lids were attached and the tins were wrapped in brown paper and string ‘as is’, and posted to service-men and women, including in Darwin.

All of my interviewees had long trenches dug in their schoolgrounds. My grandfather helped dig them at my mother’s school. The historian and other boys ‘played soldiers’ in their trenches; the girls avoided them. All students had regular practice drills of running to the trenches from classrooms if the school should be bombed. My mother’s school hall was an evacuation centre for surrounding streets and it was the only school building with windows covered by black curtains and paper so lights couldn’t draw attention from the air or ground that many people were hiding there.

A story unlike anything I’ve encountered was my mother’s recollection of what she and other students made at school in the event of bombing. Students back then had long, thin, gritty and hard red or green erasers to rub pencil off paper. One day, students at my mother’s school were asked to ensure they had one eraser at school and bring a length of old elastic from home. They then made a hole in one end of the eraser, threaded through the elastic and were expected to always wear their ’necklace’. The reason given? If there was a bombing raid, they could bite on the eraser to save their teeth from shattering. My mother hated wearing the item, and the elastic lost all stretch over time, but she kept wearing it until fear of invasion was over.

Finally, all five interviewees remembered being let out of school early when war’s end in the Pacific was declared. Running, laughing, screaming and singing, they made as much noise as possible. My mother admitted she recklessly rode her bike home zig-zag across the road. While doing so, she saw a rusty nail and picked it up to take home because no-one wasted anything back then. My grandparents’ back garden apparently had a patch of prickly pear which is a type of cactus. Later that afternoon, she found the nail in her pocket and scratched into the prickly pear ‘15/08/45’. That scar lasted until the cactus died and my mother was regularly reminded of the day when her school learned that the war was ‘over’ and they needn’t be scared any more.

*No history is boring when we look for personal stories such as those I’ve shared*. These stories also prompt us to learn from mistakes of the past and not repeat them, also to stop to celebrate the more joyous moments and, importantly, to find reason to be grateful, including grateful to our past as well as current defence force personnel who’ve enabled we fortunate people to meet here today ‘in peace’. - Indeed, how *blessed* are we that we can all meet here, today, ‘in peace’.