

The following passage, borrowed from *Fighting Words*, Australian War Writing, was read at the service. The author, a man known only as "Xav" was an eyewitness at the Broome strafing.

**THEY CAME IN THE MORNING: BROOME**  
By "Xav."

On the morning of 3 March 1942 the Japanese launched their attack on Australian soil, at undefended and under-prepared Broome. Total casualties were officially given as about seventy dead but could well have been twice that number, according to Timothy Hall in Darwin 1942, and "there was some doubt afterwards if the military had fired a single shot in anger." "Xav" was a member of the Australian "Dad's Army", the Volunteer Defence Corps.

"I wonder how much longer these refugees'll be arriving? There can't be many more left in Java. If there are, they'd be prisoners now."

"I don't know." I heard engines again and I looked out toward the point. There were eight planes coming in low above the lighthouse, coming fast and the sun glinting on their wings as they banked to come in over the bay.

"Here come some more." But these looked different. "They're fighters! Must be Yanks!"

Harry was shielding his eyes, squinting against the sun.

"Christ! They're Japs!"

Exclamation marks behind his words, I saw the red bursts of the guns from the two leading planes, the white plumes racing across the water. Then there was a roar from a boat between us and the point and I saw flame go up in a red and yellow streak, ugly raw colour that fascinated, horror splashed against the clean whiteness of the boat.

"The swine!"

The planes came on in, flying low, the sound of them hurling itself at you with a roar that was almost a physical blow, making you want to run only there was nowhere to run to, and there were women screaming and Harry swearing loud and blasphemously.

The first two planes went over, so low and so fast they seemed shapeless and shadowless, just a swift ear-shattering dark rush of wind, and then I saw the white columns magically appearing in the water, coming with terrific speed towards us.

"Down!"

We dived flat and as I hit the deck between two oil-drums I thought, clear against the shock in my mind, "What a hell of a place to dive for safety!"

The bullets chopped the end of the lighter, splintering wood and ricocheting off the ironwork with a horrible sort-lived sound, and then I heard the roar again, this time so close I knew this was death. My brain cleared from the loud blankness of the roar and I rolled on my back and saw the last four planes go over, streaks against the sky, and from the boat beside us flame was shooting in angry eruption. The Dutch mechanic was gone from the top of the hull and now the faces at the window were contorted with panic, terror-stricken fingers clawing at the glass, and the crying of the baby was lost in the screams.

"Oh, God!"

I scrambled to my feet, sick and weak in my stomach, not with fear - the shock had allowed no time for fear - but with the horror of it. The lighter still bumped against the boat and I leaped up and tore open the door. The flames were ravenous, eating their way along the hull, and there were only two sounds in the horror, the screams and the flames crackling. The doorway was filled with a struggling mass, insane with fear, fighting each other without knowing it, knowing only the flames behind them and the planes that would come again. They came tumbling out, falling from the doorway to the bottom of the lighter, and vainly I tried to get them into order, shouting myself hoarse but they were deaf to anything but the flames.

Harry was picking the kids up and carrying them to the other end of the lighter and he was saying over and over, without expression, like a broken gramophone record:

"The swine. The swine..."



**POIGNANT: A Coastwatch plane flies over the strafing sight for the ceremony.**



**HISTORY: Wrecked Catalinas from the 1942 strafing in Broome are still seen on low tides.**