



# The day the bombs fell

Vanessa Crowdey

A small group of American airmen helped defend Horn Island against the first Japanese attack on Queensland.

Note: Japanese names are written with the surname first.

At 12.25 pm on 14 March 1942, twelve Japanese Betty bombers and eight Zero fighters descended on Horn Island. For the next hour, the Japanese ruthlessly and skilfully bombed and strafed the airstrip and its installations. It was the first attack on Queensland in the Second World War.

Horn Island is located thirty kilometres north-west of Cape York, only about thirty minutes' flying time from the coast of New Guinea (see map). In 1940 the Civil Construction Corps and the Department of Main Roads began construction of an advanced operational airbase on the island, as a staging point to the north. The airfield was completed by January 1942, by which time the Japanese were moving on Singapore in the west and Rabaul in the east.

The Japanese bombed Darwin on 19 February 1942, yet a month later they were to find Horn Island seriously underdefended. The airfield was manned by about fifty RAAF personnel (including signallers from 24 Squadron), an advance party from

32 Squadron which would arrive in April, and a detachment of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion. The 49th Garrison and the Torres Strait Engineers were on nearby Thursday Island, and there were more engineers on Goode Island.

At 12.15 pm on 14 March 1942, a coastwatch station in New Guinea issued an alert that approximately twenty aircraft had been seen flying towards Thursday Island. By chance, a group of nine American Kittyhawks of 7 Squadron, 49th Fighter Group, were at Horn Island, on their way to Darwin. As soon as the alert was received, these nine took to the skies under their commander, Captain Bob Morrissey. After some delays due to maintenance problems, they collected at 12,000 feet to await the enemy.

**Opposite page (top left):** Captain Bob Morrissey, officer commanding the American Kittyhawks which helped defend Horn Island from its first raid by the Japanese. (All photographs courtesy of the author, unless otherwise attributed.)

**Opposite page (top right):** Eric Barlow, 24 Squadron, in December 1941.

**Opposite page (centre):** The Australian War Memorial's restored Mitsubishi Zero fighter.

**Opposite page (bottom left):** Lieutenant Sandford.

**Opposite page (bottom right):** An aerial photo of the Horn Island airfield, showing air-raid damage.





At 12.25 pm the Japanese aircraft were sighted. There were twelve Zero fighter escorts from the 4th Flying Group, led by Lieutenant Kawai, who would lead another three raids against Horn Island. Their mission was to escort eight Betty bombers from the 1st Flying Group, led by Lieutenant Yamagata Shigeo, to bomb the airstrip. Most of the aircraft had flown from Lae, some from Rabaul, and they had left base that morning not expecting any opposition over their target.

Despite the Kittyhawks' presence, six bombs were dropped on the runway, and over thirty were were dropped in the bush around it, probably in an attempt to locate camouflaged fuel dumps. Of the small number of aircraft on the ground, a Hudson bomber was smashed "clean in half" by a direct hit. For the ground personnel it was a frightening experience, though only three were injured. Eric Barlow, a wireless operator with 24 Squadron, recalled:

*I got caught up in the wire while running to the trenches. I got stuck there while I could hear the Zero strafing getting closer and closer. He missed me on two runs, I was lucky.*



Buildings were riddled with holes; as one aiman commented, at least the holes would let the rain in and "cool things down a bit".

There was greater drama in the air. Captain Morrissey's wingman was Lieutenant House, flying Kittyhawk *Heros Poopy*. House had succeeded in shooting down one Zero, flown by Cadet Iwasaki, when he saw another Zero on Morrissey's tail. As he went to attack it, however, his guns refused to fire. Without hesitation he flew his Kittyhawk directly at the Zero. As he explained later,

*[Morrissey] was my commanding officer at the time, he had a family, I was by myself. It wasn't much of a decision. I just felt like I owed it to him, and the outfit. It wasn't like I had much time to think about it - it was a split-second decision. Bang I just did it.*

In his report after the action, House described what he did:

*I continued my course directly at the enemy aircraft, expecting to get his fuselage in the heavy part of my wing. He had started firing, but must have observed my approach, and changed course. I continued to dive and the leading edge of my right wing went through his fuselage, approx in the middle of the canopy.*

An observer on the ground described how House "dipped his wing, and more or less plucked the Japanese fellow from his cockpit." The pilot of the Zero, Cadet Oishi, was killed instantly, and his plane crashed on Hammond Island. Years later, House recalled how he survived:

*I went to ram the plane, the wing went through the canopy and blew it up. There was pieces on fire and falling everywhere. My plane started falling and flipping over. The oxygen mask had me blinded for a while, but I found I could still fly, so I landed at Horn Island. It took about three tries.*

Landing was made more difficult by the fact that the aircraft tried to flip over if its airspeed dropped below about 240 km/h. Later a grateful Morrissey commented:

*The tough thing was, when we got back, trying to tell House that he shouldn't be so reckless and all when he's up there. Especially with his equipment, at that time we didn't have much. The guy just saved my life!*

**Top:** Kittyhawks of 7 Squadron, 49th Fighter Group, United States Army Air Force.

**Left:** Lieutenant House's Kittyhawk. The name, "Heros Poopy", was House's childhood nickname for his father.



Iwasaki's and Oishi's Zeroes were the only Japanese aircraft lost on the raid. Of the Americans, two received shrapnel wounds, while one pilot, Lieutenant Sandford, became disoriented and lost and ended up putting his plane down in the water almost 500 km south-west of Horn Island. He was rescued by Aborigines. After the Japanese departed, the remaining Kittyhawks landed, to the resounding cheers of the onlookers.

Both sides believed they had had the better of the raid. The Americans and Australians were happy that the Japanese had received "a warm and uncomfortable welcome," and believed they had destroyed more Japanese aircraft than the two Zeroes that were in fact lost. For their part, the Japanese carried home exaggerated reports of success, claiming to have shot down seven and possibly nine American aircraft, and to have inflicted extensive damage on ground installations.

However, the attackers had left one gift for the celebrating troops: an unexploded bomb, buried in the dust beside the airstrip, right beside the Signals tent. The bomb was on a timer, but did not explode. The job of "delousing" it was given to a group of six engineers, under Major Sherman. The engineers were known as the "Suicide Squad", because their task was to build a tunnel under the airstrip to fill with explosives and detonate if the Japanese captured the base. The group had no experience or training in defusing bombs, but were deemed the only personnel present who were "qualified" to have a go.

One of the "Suicide Squad", Corporal Smeltzer, recalls the day with clarity:

*We dug down about nine feet until we found the tail of the bomb, which was embedded on a slight angle. We tied one end of a very long rope to the tail and attached the other end to the only truck on the island, a Chevy. The six of us piled onto the tray of the flat-top truck and the driver took up the slack.*

The rope broke, so the men loosened the soil, doubled the rope, and tried again:

*This time when the strain was taken, the bomb came loose with a rush, banged on the angle iron and caught there. After extricating it from the angle iron, we began again, but could not get far because of the bomb craters blocking the way. Two of us got off and carried the bomb out of harm's way and dumped it in a bomb crater.*

The group attempted to blow the bomb up, but only succeeded in opening the casing with the fuse intact and the main charge unexploded. They left the bomb in the crater, only to be informed that this was the first unexploded bomb on Australian soil and that military intelligence wanted the fuse retrieved for examination. However, when the men returned next day to remove the fuse, they found the crater full of water, after an overnight downpour. Two men dived in and pulled the bomb out, and the fuse was finally extricated and sent to Canberra, ending two days of high drama on Horn Island.



The Kittyhawks of the 49th Fighter Group flew off to help in the defence of Darwin. Captain Morrissey was to rise to the rank of colonel, before injuries received in a Japanese kamikaze raid on the USS *Nashville* forced him into retirement. Lieutenant House went on to fly over 400 missions in his career. He retired as a colonel in 1960, his decorations including five Purple Hearts and five Distinguished Flying Crosses. Today he sums up his recollections of war: "I loved to fly, but I hated the killing."

**Vanessa Crowdey** is curator of the Torres Strait Heritage Museum, located at the Gateway Torres Strait Resort on Horn Island. Tours of Second World War sites are available, and veterans are especially catered for. For information, **phone (07) 4069 2222** or **fax (07) 4069 2211**.

**Top left:** A Mitsubishi G4M "Betty" bomber, of the type which took part in the raid on Horn Island. (AWM 044157)

**Above:** The wreckage of the Hudson bomber, victim of the 14 March raid, is still visible today.