POWs and ‘enemy aliens’

Australians captured about 19,000 soldiers who became POWs within Australia. The government had the power to put enemies in designated enemy internment camps. These included Germans and Italians, Australian-born people of ‘enemy’ descent, enemy transferred here from overseas and some Australians labelled ‘enemies’ because of their political activities.

Rationing drills and defence

The government introduced petrol rationing in Australia in October 1940. In August 1942, Australians had to ‘deprive themselves of every selfish comfortable habit’. In practical terms, this meant rationing of goods that were in short supply or for which the military had priority. The government distributed ration books from which people had to use coupons as well as money to buy butter, meat, sugar, tea, clothing and footwear. Rationing concluded between 1947 and 1950. From late 1941 onwards, Australians prepared for air raids by constructing air-raid trenches and shelters. People practised air-raid drills and evacuation procedures.

The bombing of Darwin and northern Australia, 1942–43

From February 1942 until November 1943, Japanese aircraft conducted over 60 aerial attacks on the mainland of northern Australia. The first was on Darwin on 19 February 1942. It led many Australians to fear that the Japanese were about to invade.

The attack on Darwin began at 9.58 am. During the next 40 minutes, Japanese bombers launched their bombs on the harbour, the US and RAN shipping docked there, water and electricity supplies, military and civilian airports and the local hospital. One hour later, they destroyed 20 aircraft at Darwin’s RAAF base.

Over the next 22 months, the Japanese launched bombing raids on towns across northern Australia. Another heavy attack on Darwin on 16 June 1942 succeeded in setting fire to fuel stored near the harbour and damaging railway facilities, stores and banks.

The Japanese submarine attack on Sydney Harbour, 31 May – 1 June 1942

On 31 May 1942, Japanese submarines released three midget submarines just off Sydney Heads with the intention of destroying Australia’s naval battlehips. Six hours later, the first submarine became caught in anti-torpedo nets and its two-man crew detonated a mine, killing themselves before they could be caught.

Just before 10 pm the same night, the navy detected the second midget submarine, which was fired on just near Garden Island. The Japanese reacted by launching two torpedoes. One failed to explode but the other detonated under the HMAS Kuttobul, causing the death of 21 sailors. The submarine escaped.

At 5 am the next day, the HMAS Yandra detected the third midget submarine. The two Japanese crewmen committed suicide.

The sinking of the Centaur, 14 May 1943

Japanese submarines patrolled the coastline between Australia and New Guinea trying to sink enemy naval vessels. Australian hospital ships on duty there had to comply with the standard international markings that would prevent them from being fired upon by mistake — white superstructures, multiple red crosses, green bands on their sides and Red Cross numbers on both sides of their bows. These were all well-lit at night.

Japanese submarine torpedoed AHS Centaur

Most of those on board were asleep. The fuel tank ignited. There was no time to launch lifeboats or send distress calls. Within three minutes the burning ship had disappeared. Rescuers recovered only 64 of 332 passengers and crew. News of the tragedy was kept quiet for another three days so that the government could notify next of kin. People condemned the attack as a war crime and the government encouraged people to use their anger in increased determination to defeat the Japanese.