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# ***Japanese submarine attack on Sydney Harbour, 31 May 1942***

an address<sup>1</sup> to the Institute on 24 June 2010 by  
**Air Vice-Marshal R. B. Treloar, AO, RAAFAR<sup>2</sup>**  
President, Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales



*Three Japanese midget submarines, supported by five large mother submarines and two sea planes, attacked naval shipping in Sydney Harbour on the night of 31 May – 1 June 1942. Here, Bob Treloar outlines the background and build-up to the attack, the operation and its aftermath.*

31 May 1942 was the day World War II came to Sydney. Three Japanese midget submarines attacked naval shipping in the harbour that night. Until then, the war had seemed a long way off.

By May 1942, Sydney had undertaken the transition to a remote war relatively calmly. It was over two years since the first soldiers had left for the Middle East to fight the Italians, Germans and French. Australian forces had departed to fight the Japanese in Malaya and had been captured in Singapore – but even that had seemed a long way off. There had also been a German sea-mining campaign off Sydney Heads in late 1940, but that had claimed its last victim some 14 months earlier.

For Sydney, the first sign of war appeared on 16 May 1942 when a Japanese submarine had surfaced and attacked a merchant ship off Newcastle. However, the approach of the war should not have been a surprise.

## **Background and Build-up to the Attack on Sydney**

At 0750 hours on Sunday 7 December 1941, 430 aircraft launched from six Japanese aircraft carriers attacked military installations on Hawaii. The surprise at Pearl Harbour was complete<sup>3</sup>. In less than two hours, the United States lost eight battleships, three cruisers and three destroyers sunk or damaged; and nearly 24,000 of its personnel were killed. The Japanese employed five midget submarines at Pearl Harbour, but not very successfully<sup>4</sup>. None survived the raid and two have still not been found.

Ninety minutes before the strike on Pearl Harbour, Japanese troops landed in Malaya. They concentrated their forces against widely-dispersed defending troops who were unprepared, poorly equipped and supported

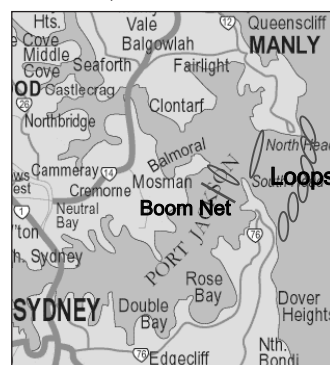
by faulty British intelligence. Four hours later Singapore was bombed. On 12 February 1942, 10 weeks after the first landing on the peninsula, Singapore surrendered.

A week later, on 19 February 1942, Darwin was attacked by aircraft from essentially the same Japanese Carrier Task Force that had attacked Pearl Harbour. War had arrived on Australia's doorstep. Strict censorship, however, left the Australian population unaware of the level of devastation inflicted on Darwin and downplayed the loss of life.

## **Sydney 1942**

In Sydney, people went about their everyday activities and were only slightly inconvenienced by the war. A 'brown out' slowed people making their way home after a night at the pictures or from a dance; and enforcing a 'black out' was considered too difficult. The ferry service continued to operate to and from Manly. Ferry commuters had become used to seeing friendly warships in the harbour and the fortifications that surrounded the harbour to defend it against attack by air and by sea.

An early radar system had been established on the coast and anti-aircraft guns were positioned to defend the city, including gun emplacements on the harbour bridge pylons. There were gun positions and observers with searchlights on the harbour's main headlands. To guard the harbour against a sea-borne attack, electronic loops designed to detect the passage of submarines had been installed on the sea bed – six loops outside the heads and two just inside (see map). There was an anti-submarine boom net, in three sections, across the harbour.



*Left: Sydney Harbour, showing the locations of the electronic loops and the boom net*

<sup>1</sup>Attended by 73 members and guests

<sup>2</sup>E-mail: treloars@bigpond.net.au

<sup>3</sup>Considering the superpower politics being played out in the Pacific at the time, the attack should not have been a surprise. The oil embargo against Japan by the United States, Britain, Holland and Australia as a consequence of Japan's invasion and continued war in China resulted in Japan having only 18 months' supply of oil available for the homeland.

<sup>4</sup>There has been speculation that torpedoes from one of the midget submarines struck two of the battleships (*West Virginia* and *Oklahoma*) during the air attack.

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