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BOOK REVIEWS

Darwin's submarine I-124: the story of a covert Japanese submarine squadron waging a secret underwater war against northern Australia

by Dr Tom Lewis

Avonmore Books: Kent Town, South Australia; 2010; 182 pp.; ISBN 978 0 957 73519 4; RRP \$38.50 (paperback); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 740 LEWI 2010



This volume relates the activities of a Japanese submarine squadron that waged war against northern Australia from 1942 to 1944, and the Australian efforts that sank the title vessel, even before the Japanese air attacks on Darwin had begun. Those air attacks and the Australian responses have been well described in several books, and the 2008 film, *Australia*, portrayed their ferocity and scale, with some historical licence. In 2011, President Obama visited Darwin and noted that the events of 1942 were truly Australia's Pearl Harbour. There is now a national day of observance on 19 February annually to commemorate the first bombing of Darwin.

Former Administrator of the Northern Territory, Austin Asche, provides a positive Foreword acknowledging that Dr Lewis has produced a competent and well researched account of the Japanese naval threat, and how it was averted. I agree with this view. Lewis served as an intelligence officer in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). He is active in World War II historical matters, especially in the Northern Territory. This is increasingly important now that the ranks of the participants are so thin, yet much of the story warrants further analysis.

Ironically, *I-124* and its sister submarines were based on the design of World War I U-boats given to Japan as an ally of the British, from German reparations. These designs had flaws replicated in the Japanese copies. The Japanese submarine fleet was substantial, but no more than 50 of the 190 submarines deployed survived the war. However, the submarine fleet could have significantly altered the war in the Pacific if used effectively. Rather than hunt in packs like the U-boats that almost won the Battle of the Atlantic for Germany, they were used piecemeal for tasks like mine laying, deploying seaplanes and midget submarines, seaplane refuelling and underwater transport. They attacked allied warships rather than higher value targets like freighters, troop transports and oil tankers. There were never enough submariners to provide proper rest after missions and the boats were unprepared for tropic and Arctic extremes.

The exploits of the minesweeping corvette, HMAS *Deloraine*, deserve wider recognition. Post-war Japanese records and Lewis's studies make clear that *Deloraine* sank *I-124* in the first of two 'engagements' with Japanese submarines. Gill (1957)¹ describes the engagement of *I-124* by HMAS *Deloraine* in terms which clearly infer that *Deloraine* was responsible for *I-124's* destruction. He notes though that the 1946 official summary of enemy

submarine casualties during the War (German, Italian and Japanese) gives credit to USS *Edsall* and the three Australian corvettes involved (HMA Ships *Deloraine*, *Lithgow* and *Katoomba*). The RAN website still records that this credit was shared. With the passage of 70 years, it perhaps matters little to the remaining participants or their relatives, but it is surely important to correct the record when possible.

Dr Lewis reviews the engagement that sank *I-124* with its 80 crew members, and gives full credit to the captain (Lieutenant Commander Desmond Menlove, RANR) and crew of HMAS *Deloraine*. He outlines attempts to make contact with the crippled submarine on the seabed and later efforts to salvage or enter the wreck for intelligence purposes. HMAS *Deloraine* survived the war, giving fine service, and was paid off in 1948.

Relatives of *I-124's* crew campaigned in the late 1950s to have the remains returned to Japan. Ironically, a Japanese company around then was contracted to clear some wartime wrecks around Darwin. But *I-124* proved too difficult because of its depth (167 feet), distance from land (50 miles off Darwin near Bathurst Island), and the weather.

In the early 1970s, two competing Australian groups attempted to salvage *I-124* or recover artefacts, and the Japanese and Australian governments became involved. In 1977, the Australian Government declared *I-124* an Historic Shipwreck within a Protected Zone. In 1984, another private attempt to enter *I-124* was made and official dives were made by the RAN. In 1989, the Western Australia Maritime Museum planned to dive on the wreck, but permission was ultimately denied. In the event, the Museum gained useful information from a remotely-operated vehicle.

This book enhances our awareness and understanding of naval battles around Darwin in 1942. It is attractively presented and well referenced. It contains many evocative photographs, diagrams and copies of supporting documents. It provides a poignant reminder of wartime sacrifices by those serving, and by their families.

Dr Lewis considers that *I-124* is perhaps the most exciting and interesting shipwreck in Australian waters. Others may have their own candidates that might include Japanese midget submarine *M-24* that took part in the May 1942 attack on Sydney Harbour.

Lewis concludes that there should be regular inspections to ensure *I-124's* continuing stability as a monument and tomb. I agree; only these can ensure that dangerous materials do not escape, and that *I-124's* brave crew continues to rest in peace.

Ken Broadhead

¹G. Hermon Gill (1957). *Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942* (Australian War Memorial: Canberra).