

The bombing of Broome

Alliance with Netherlands East Indies

The entry of Japan into World War Two forged an alliance between the American, British, Dutch and Australian (ABDA) military in the interests of defending the region around the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia) and Australia. Secret cablegrams, letters and notes were exchanged between Australia and the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) on a range of topics including the transfer of Japanese interned soldiers to Australian territory, establishing a radiotelegraph service between the two countries, Australian training of NEI air crew and the exchange of diplomatic representation.

Evacuation to Broome

Evacuation to Australia of NEI bureaucrats and military personnel with the expertise to continue the war effort began two days after the fall of Singapore. Broome was chosen because it was close to Java and could take both land-based aircraft and flying boats. The evacuation operation transformed the sleepy pearling town into a high air traffic port, akin to *La Guardia Field* (New York's airport) at its busiest. Around 60 aircraft were processed daily and between 7,000 and 8,000 refugees passed through Broome in 14 days.

Shuttle flights were discontinued the day after the Battle of the Java Sea on 28 February and reopened only briefly on the night of 2 March 1942 to enable the *Marineluchtvaartdienst* (Dutch Naval Air Service, or *MLD*) to escape with 80 crew and 81 civilians, including widows and orphans of the Java Sea Battle.

Japanese attack

Now in Australia, the Dutch evacuees thought themselves safe from the Japanese. But shortly after their arrival at 9.30am on 3 March, nine Japanese Zero fighters accompanied by a Japanese reconnaissance plane brutally attacked the unprotected aircraft. As the Zeros made slow fly-pasts with open cockpits, parents pushed their children into the water in an effort to save them.

There were many heroic acts. For example Willy Josina Maria van Aggeren, who lost both her parents that day, was ferried to safety on the chest of the pilot who later adopted her.

The massive loss of life included four Lokman children, both parents and two siblings survived. The bodies of Hendrika, Jeanette, Jan and Johannes Lokman were never recovered. The entire Brandenburg family: father, mother and child; Pieter Schraver and his wife and Mrs Kuin and her child all died as did the Hendrikse, who were found dead wrapped in an embrace – she could not swim so he made the ultimate sacrifice.



Centre: Willy Josina Maria van Aggeren is a survivor of the Broome bombing, rescued as a baby by one of the pilots. Both her parents were killed in the tragedy and she was later adopted by her rescuer. On the right is her grandson.

pools of fire about all the boats and we could see figures leaping from the boats into the fire...There were heads bobbing about in the water...We slowed, and bent over the side of the lighter, dragging them into the lighter. I was weak inside with revulsion at the way some of them were burned... I leaned over and lifted a little boy, whose head was singed and bald... The planes came in again...I saw the nose of one dip and...I watched him come down growing bigger fast, blotting out the sky, and I heard the bullets coming across the lighter, and then [the plane] was gone...I turned and the first thing I saw was the little kid I had just dragged out of the water... A bullet had hit him in the face."

Dutch commemoration

For the Dutch, it was a dark day in the history of the *MLD*. All told, 48 of the 161 people on board the flying boats lost their lives by gunfire or while swimming through burning oil – 16 men, 12 women and 20 children.

The Dutch community in Perth hold a service in May every year – to commemorate the end of war – at the Dutch Annex of the Perth War Cemetery. It includes laying a rose on the gravestones of the 35 Broome victims buried there.



Photographs from top to bottom: One of the six aircraft, probably a Liberator, destroyed on the Broome aerodrome, 3 March 1942. Australian War Memorial P02039.003. Netherlands East Indies forces in Australia. R. Willemsen, courtesy Nonja Peters. Netherlands East Indies forces in Australia. R. Willemsen, courtesy Nonja Peters. Troops of the Netherlands East Indies Army march along Swanston Street, Melbourne on United Nations Flag Day, June 1943. Courtesy Nonja Peters. The burntout remains of an aircraft from the bombing of Broome, 3 March 1942. Australian War Memorial P02039.004. The war cemetery at Broome where 26 new graves were added as a result of the Japanese air raids in 1942. Australian War Memorial 051724. Perth War Cemetery, Dutch Annex. Courtesy Nonja Peters.



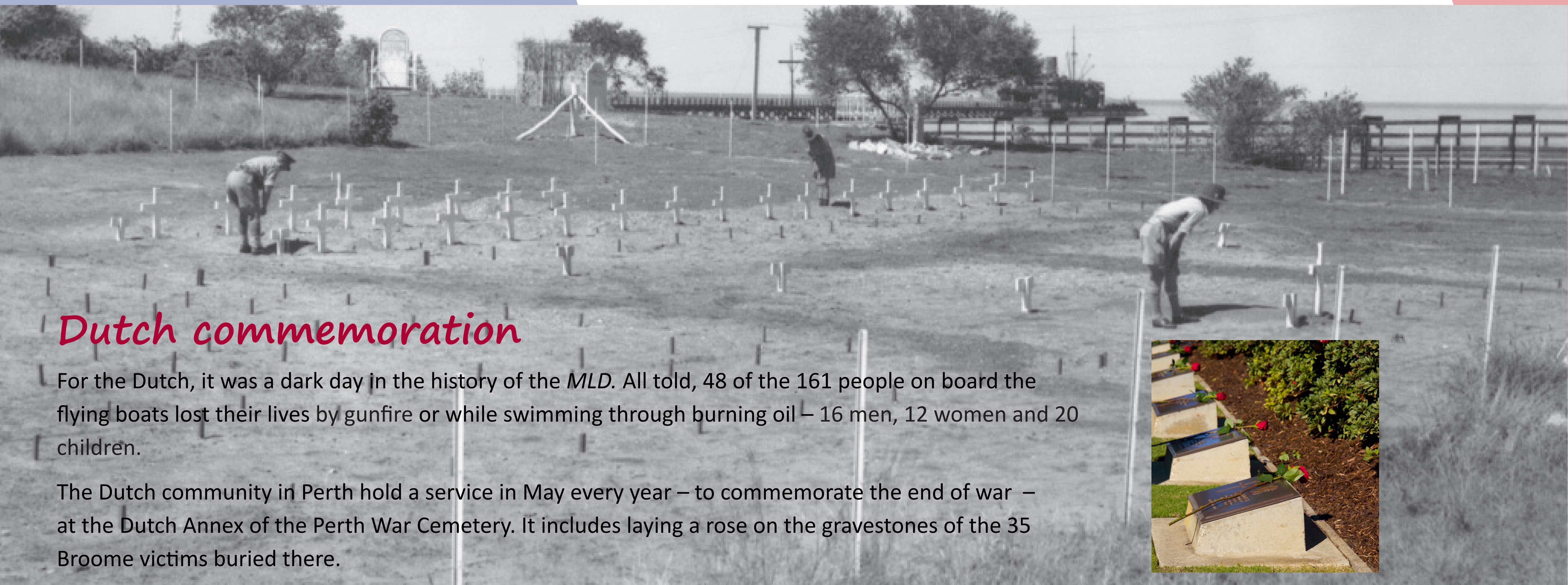
Eyewitness accounts

Eye-witness reports describe the ensuing 20 minute attack as a horrific massacre with survivors recalling that even under water you could hear the noise and feel the pressure of the Japanese bullets.

A Broome resident recalls: "[T]he rat-tat-tat of their machine guns was followed by a spectacular display of fireworks [as the Japanese] used incendiary bullets...They...set fire to everything they hit. In a few minutes the whole of the harbour was covered by a pall of thick, black smoke..."

As one Australian military personnel noted when the attack began: "I saw the red bursts of the guns from the two leading planes, the white plumes racing across the water...[T]he faces at the window [of the flying boat] were contorted with panic, terror-stricken fingers clawing at the glass...Two of the women and four children died in the plane. Fourteen made it to the lighter – five women and nine children...two of the women and one of the children were badly burned... their skin cracking and lifting, the flesh shrivelling and turning a reddish-brown... I turned to the two youngsters, both little girls, who had been hit by bullets. One of them had fainted...The other just sat and stared at the shattered stump of her arm."

The Australians took a lighter (fuel boat) out to rescue the survivors: "[T]here were floating pools of fire about all the boats and we could see figures leaping from the boats into the fire...There were heads bobbing about in the water...We slowed, and bent over the side of the lighter, dragging them into the lighter. I was weak inside with revulsion at the way some of them were burned... I leaned over and lifted a little boy, whose head was singed and bald... The planes came in again...I saw the nose of one dip and...I watched him come down growing bigger fast, blotting out the sky, and I heard the bullets coming across the lighter, and then [the plane] was gone...I turned and the first thing I saw was the little kid I had just dragged out of the water... A bullet had hit him in the face."



Curtin's leadership forged a new era

War in the Pacific

7 December 1941 – bombing of Pearl Harbor

The start of the Pacific theatre of war was a critical time for John Curtin and a challenging test for a man who had been prime minister for only two months. For the first time in Australia's history Curtin independently declared war on a foreign power.

As it became clear that Britain's response was inadequate to protect Singapore, long held as the "last bastion" for Australia's safety, Curtin published his famous article at the end of December 1941: "Without any inhibitions of any kind I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free from any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom..."

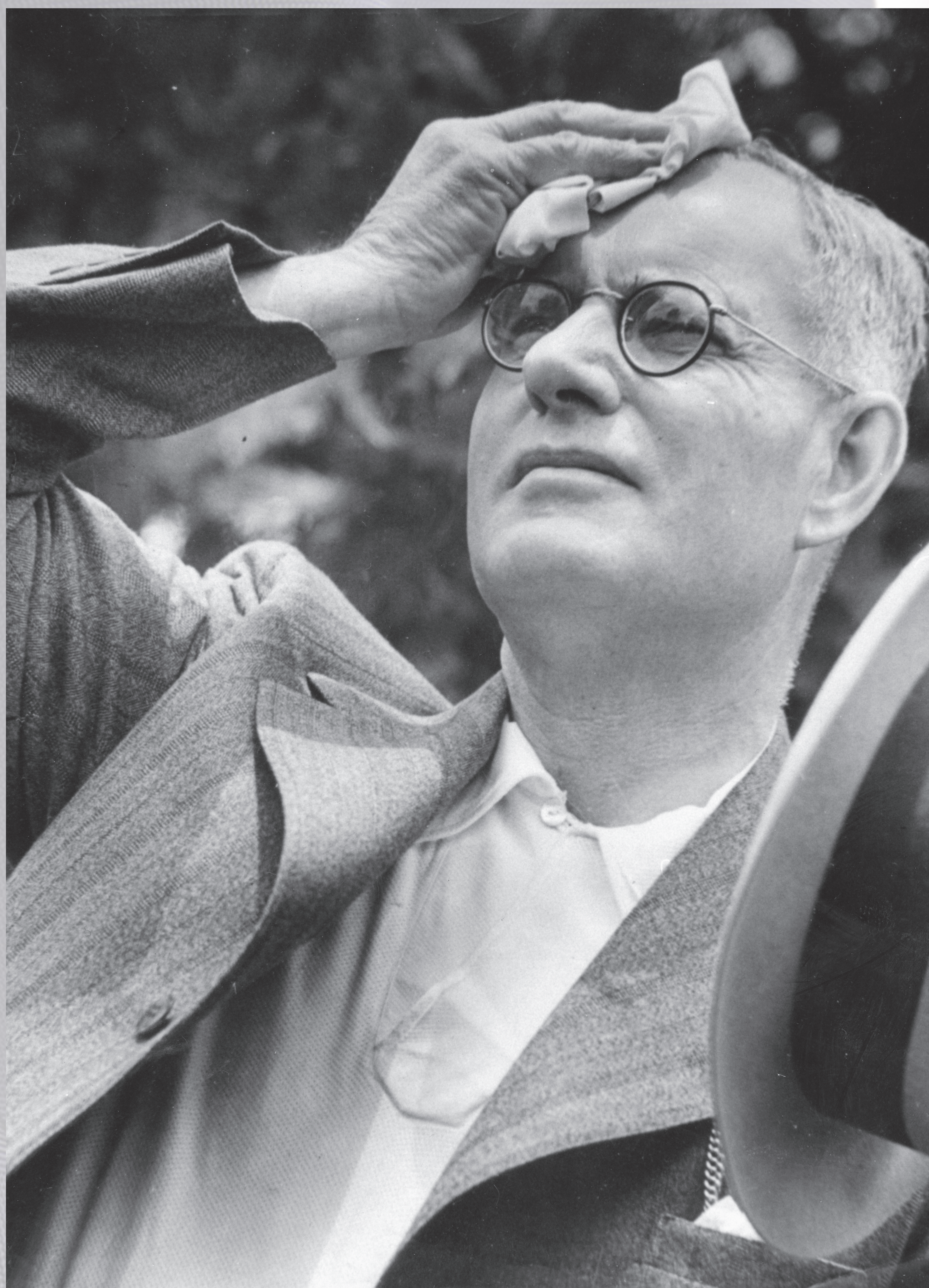
15 February 1942 – fall of Singapore

When Singapore surrendered to the Japanese Curtin issued a press statement, saying to the Australian people: "The fall of Singapore opens the battle for Australia...It is now work or fight as we have never worked or fought before..."

Four days later Darwin was bombed, the first "physical contact of war within Australia". The following series of air raids on Broome, Wyndham and Darwin left Australians feeling virtually unprotected in the face of possible Japanese invasion.

3 March 1942 – bombing of Broome and Wyndham

According to Curtin, "As time passes the enemy comes ever nearer. Darwin, Wyndham and Broome are three important strategical points in the security of Australia as a whole...The nation is at war and everything in it, therefore, has to be devoted to the purpose of war."



Opposition to Churchill

Curtin and Churchill engaged in a heated exchange of top secret cables concerning control of the 6th and 7th divisions of Australian troops returning from the Middle East to protect British interests. After the fall of Singapore, Curtin wanted the troops returned to Australia to defend the homeland against a possible Japanese invasion, but Churchill unilaterally diverted the Australian 7th Division to Burma. An angry Curtin countermanded Churchill's order, telling the British prime minister that "it was quite impossible to reverse a decision which we have made with the utmost care."

Address to America

Curtin was the first Australian prime minister to address the American people in a radio broadcast just days before the arrival of General Douglas MacArthur to take up his appointment as Supreme Commander of the South West Pacific Area as agreed between President Roosevelt and Curtin. A close relationship with the United States was essential to Australia's defence interests. By mid-September 1942 the Japanese were pushed back along the Kokoda Track in New Guinea and the tide of the war was turning.

Beyond Broome

At the end of 1942 Curtin managed to push through the ratification of the Statute of Westminster in order to declare Australia a self-governing Dominion of the British Empire and a fully independent state, free from British control and able to form its own defence and foreign policies. He used his wartime prime ministership to further his dream for a fair and just society, implementing Labor programs in the areas of economic reform, social services, immigration, education and foreign policy. In 1944 he set up the Department of Immigration to organise postwar immigration to Australia. All these changes were the basis for the enormous growth of the Australian economy in the postwar years.

After an overseas trip to visit President Roosevelt in Washington and attend the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London in mid-1944, Curtin's health began to deteriorate. At the end of April 1945 Curtin was admitted to a private hospital in Canberra and after several weeks returned to the Lodge where he remained until his death on 5 July 1945. After a lying-in-state in King's Hall in Canberra, his body was flown to Perth and he was buried at Karrakatta Cemetery.

John Curtin

Born 8 January 1885.

February 1917 – moved to Western Australia.

November 1928 – entered politics as a Member of the House of Representatives for Fremantle.

September 1934 – became Leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

7 October 1941 – became prime minister.

Lead a minority government (held by two independent votes) until election in 1943.

21 August 1943 election – the voters' overwhelming confidence in Curtin gave the ALP a landslide victory, with ALP gaining 49 of 74 seats in the lower House and winning all 19 contested Senate seats. In WA, Curtin's home state, Labor won all five seats and increased its Senate vote by 17.5%.

Curtin is the only prime minister to represent a Western Australian seat in the federal parliament.

5 July 1945 – died in office.



Photographs from top to bottom: JCPML00376/9: Prime Minister John Curtin, c.1942
JCPML00562/2: John Curtin preparing to broadcast to the United States, 14 March 1942.
JCPML00376/69: John Curtin welcomes General Douglas MacArthur to Sydney, 8 June 1942.
JCPML00382/58: John Curtin (second from left) visits Perth for the first time since becoming prime minister. He is welcomed at the Perth Railway Station on 24 January 1942 by (from left to right) Dr Tom Meagher (Lord Mayor of Perth), Mrs Elsie Curtin, daughter Elsie, John Willcock (WA Premier) and Edward Needham, MLA.
JCPML00376/201: John and Elsie Curtin (centre) and the prime minister's party had to leave the Sydney Express and shelter under South Brisbane Interstate Station during an air raid alarm, August 1942.