

News from Under the Southern Cross - Edition 4.

Official Visit to Darwin

1 March 2021

Upon presenting my credentials to the Governor-General on the 17th of February, I officially began my duties as Ambassador. Under the Commonwealth system of Australia, all new ambassadors embark on official visits to the states and territories in order to introduce themselves. I selected the Northern Territory as my first destination for a visit and spent time from the 18th to the 21st of February in the Territory capital of Darwin. I was accompanied on this visit by Sydney Consul General Kiya, whose office is responsible for administering all matters related to the Northern Territory.

(1) Darwin and its ties to Japan

The Northern Territory is extraordinarily large, 1.35 million square kilometres in area, encompassing half of Australia's northern-most territory and stretching all the way to the centre of the country. Yet its population is a mere 246,000. Darwin, for its part, may not be as familiar to many Japanese people as Sydney or Melbourne. However it was the setting for the film *Australia*, which was shown in Japan, starring Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman in the lead roles. In truth, Darwin's links to Japan are not so superficial. It shares ties in the three areas of history, business, and national security.

(2) History

The impetus for my visit to Darwin was an invitation to attend a commemoration ceremony on the 19th of February marking the anniversary of the air raid on Darwin. The 19th of February 1942 during the Second World War witnessed the start of a bombing campaign centered on Darwin and other coastal areas of Australia's northern regions conducted by the former Japanese military. Ninety-seven subsequent air raids were carried out, resulting in over 260 deaths and more than 410 wounded. Just before the beginning of this campaign, on the 20th of January, the Imperial Japanese Navy submarine I-124 was sunk in the open ocean approximately 95 kilometres west-north-west of Darwin by a combined attack by an Australian mine-sweeper dropping depth charges and bombing by American air force aircraft. Its entire crew of 80 souls were lost, and even now their remains lie within the vessel on the bottom of the sea.



Laying a wreath at the Bombing of Darwin Day Commemoration service

When you look upon this scene, you begin to understand how the deep wounds that the war produced for both sides linger on in Darwin. As one person who appreciates that the peace and prosperity of today came at the cost of the sacrifice of such precious lives, I humbly laid wreathes in memory of the crew of the USS Peary, which was sunk during the air raid on Darwin, and the crew of the I-124.



Laying a wreath at the U.S.S. Peary Memorial

Yet the history of the Second World War is certainly not all there is. Australia's northern regions have shared a long-standing relationship with Japan. From the Meiji period onwards, many Japanese people travelled as divers to Thursday Island in Queensland (the setting of the

renowned novel *Night Meeting on Thursday Island* by Shiba Ryotaro), Broome in Western Australia and Darwin itself in order to search for and harvest pearls, and left a strong impression of themselves. Moreover, during the First World War both Japan and Australia participated in that conflict on the side of the allied forces.



Laying a wreath at the I-124 Submarine Memorial

Special mention must also be made of post-war reconciliation efforts. From the 1950s through to the 1960s, the Fujita Salvage Corporation quietly and diligently went about its salvage operations, removing sunken ships and debris from Darwin Harbour so that it wouldn't impede shipping. There is a heart-warming tale of conversations and exchanges between the Fujita family and the local Uniting Church. I bow my head in respect to the lasting efforts made by people from both sides.



Visit to the Darwin Memorial Uniting Church

(3) Business

Another area which has garnered expectations as an area to further promote the ties linking together Darwin and Japan is business. The Ichthys LNG Project located outside of the city constitutes one of the largest foreign investments ever financed by corporate Japan, to the tune of 4 billion US dollars. The INPEX Corporation has assumed responsibility for administering corporate Japan's first large-scale LNG project, which itself constitutes 7% of all of Japan's annual LNG imports. I myself was able to visit the facility, and in truth its sheer size and scale surpassed my expectations. I was particularly impressed by the sight of Japanese and Australian technicians working together on its day-to-day operations.



Visit to the INPEX Corporation

Moreover, Japanese companies are currently involved in the construction of the world's largest prawn-breeding farm. The Northern Territory is also actively encouraging cooperation in the space industry and rare earths, and has a strong interest in developing ties with Japanese businesses.

One thing I must not overlook is tourism. Uluru (also referred to as Ayer's Rock), located in the southern part of the Northern Territory, is a popular destination, so much so that in 2019 the Japanese constituted the highest number of foreign tourists visiting the Northern Territory.

(4) National Security

Darwin is Australia's gateway to Asia, and is a vital point linking both the Indian and Pacific oceans. It is often said that "It's quicker to go to Singapore by plane (from Darwin) than to Canberra". By fortune of a good location and a sparsely-populated vast land, it's become ideal for conducting defence exercises.

The Northern Territory has become the backdrop for a rapid acceleration in Japan-Australia defence cooperation in recent years. Since 2008 the JMSDF has participated in multilateral Exercise Kakadu hosted by the ADF, while the JGSDF has also taken part in joint Exercise Southern Jackaroo. The RAA currently under negotiation, once it is concluded, promises to raise both the quality and quantity of joint exercises conducted between Japan and Australia.



Visit to the Northern Command

When one considers that Australia's security concerns are concentrated to the north of the country, Darwin is gradually becoming a focal point given its strategic importance on the front line of Australia's defences. In fact, 10 years have already passed since the US Marine Corps conducted the first of its now annual rotation of personnel through Darwin. I was able to conduct an inspection of the ADF Headquarters Northern Command located in Darwin, and was able to see with my own eyes how the US and Australian militaries co-exist and cooperate with one another.

(5) In closing

There are no direct flights to Darwin from Canberra, and it took 4 hours to reach via way of Sydney. It was a trip that served to remind me just how vast Australia is, but also allowed me to well-understand some of the reasons why Australia and Japan regard each other with such fervent interest.

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