



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – USS Peary Commemoration

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**Remarks of Ambassador Bleich  
USS Peary Commemoration, 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
USS Peary Memorial, Darwin**

*(As prepared for delivery – February 19, 2012)*

Their Excellencies, Ms. Quinten Bryce, Governor General of Australia, and Mr. Michael Bryce;

Her Honor, the Honorable Sally Thomas, Administrator of the Northern Territory;

The Honorable Julia Gilliard, Prime Minister of Australia;

The Honorable Tony Abbott, Leader of the Opposition,

The Honorable Paul Henderson, Chief Minister of the Northern Territory,

Mr. Terry Mills, Leader of the Opposition of the Northern Territory,

The Right Worshipful the Lord Mayor of Darwin Graeme Sawyer,

Representatives of federal, state and local governments,

Members of the armed forces,

Our Veterans

Honored guests,

Thank you for the privilege of allowing me to join you here to commemorate an event of special importance in the shared history of our two nations.

I especially want to thank Rick Setter and the Australian American Association for organizing this commemoration. You have kept the flame alive all these years, honoring and reminding us of what took place just out there in the waters of Darwin Harbor seventy years ago.

We look at these still waters, this gathering of friends, this calm day without fear, and it feels normal. We wake each morning assuming some basic things – that whatever



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challenges we may face – we are not in mortal danger, our families are safe, and our nation is secure.

This is why certain dates are forever seared into our national consciousness. In America, those dates are December 7, 1941 – a date which will live in infamy – and September 11, 2001. On those two dreadful mornings, our casual assumption that our borders were secure, and that our families were always safe, was shattered. The world was turned upside down overnight.

February 19, 1942 was just such a day for the people of Australia, and especially for the people of Darwin.

On a day like that, what we look for most is the comfort and support of our friends. Our nations shared each other's pain on each of these terrible days. Australians lost their lives alongside Americans in the Pacific and on U.S. soil in the attacks of September 11. And nearly as many Americans as Australians perished in this very harbor fighting along with their Aussie mates as bombs rained down upon them.

Events like these leave a permanent mark on our nations' souls, bruises that are still tender even 70 years later. I experienced this during President Obama's visit here just a few months ago. There were many powerful moments during his visit to Australia – his address to the Parliament in Canberra, and his embrace with a raucous crowd of Australian and American troops just a few miles from here. But the most powerful moment of all occurred right here, on this very spot, as he wordlessly comforted and embraced those who had survived the horrible events of February 19, 1942. Their tears demonstrated all too clearly that the pain of that morning 70 years ago remains. Our tears witnessing that moment, were a testament to the fact that those of us not yet born, also know the painful legacy of that day. And those tears are a tribute to the bravery of the people who laid down their lives that day in the years that followed to keep us free.

So while these dates remind us of horror, pain, and loss, they also remind us of the true meaning of courage and strength and resilience. No crew better demonstrated those qualities than that of the USS Peary.

As Rick Setter so eloquently reminded us, in the days following Japan's declaration of war on December 7, the Peary had endured one attack after another in its voyage to this harbor. Just two days after Pearl Harbor, the USS Peary and its crew were attacked by Japanese bombers while moored in the Philippines. As soon as it was back at sea it suffered three separate bombing and torpedo attacks on three consecutive days.



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So by the time the Peary reached this harbor and took up its position, the Peary and its crew had demonstrated that they were prepared to defend themselves, Darwin and this great nation of Australia.

We think of the young men aboard the Peary on the morning of the attack – many of them barely 18 or 19 – seeing the sky darken on the horizon and then hearing again the stomach-turning sound of aircraft preparing to bear down on them. Men like Commander Herb Kriloff, who is here with us today, and served as Officer on Deck of the USS Preston that morning. We see their eyes scanning the skies, their mouths dry, their ears throbbing; and then suddenly facing a sky filled with aircraft, and they hear those first horrifying shrieks of metal and fragments.

Yet, despite this unspeakable fear, they maintain their stations and they fight. They fight with the strength of knowing that they may have only minutes to live. Right up until the very end, as the mortally wounded Peary was sliding into the ocean, the men aboard refused to stop firing. The Peary's gunners remained at their post, with the sinking ship engulfed in fire, firing at the enemy until the last plane flew away.

Here, in this place, Australians and Americans together maintained their hope and resolve in the darkest and last moments of their lives. It is that great spirit, that great faith, that we commemorate today.

Their final moments have sanctified these waters and this day well beyond any words or tributes we can offer.

For us, the challenge is to never forget the causes for which they gave their lives – Australians and Americans together. The Peary is more than a valiant ship, it is more even than the sacred resting place of those who perished on board; it is a crucible from which our great partnership was forged. In the first ever attack upon Australian soil, Americans were there, side by side with their Australian brothers, fighting as one. Our two nations were bonded in blood that day. And we've been devoted to one another ever since in the battle for what's most important – security, prosperity, and freedom.

I am reminded of that spirit – and what we have built together – each day when I walk the grounds of the U.S. Embassy in Canberra. There is a magnificent oak tree there that was planted by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in September 1943. She flew here in 1940's era transport, during wartime, at a time when fighting was still raging just offshore in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. And after several days of difficult flying she stood atop an exposed hill in the center of Australia's capital, and she planted that tree. She planted it with absolute confidence that that tree would continue to grow taller and stronger every year.



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I can think of no better symbol of the growth of our two countries' relationship.

Like that tree, over the last seventy years, our bonds have deepened, broadened, and extended each year, reaching closer to the sky. While our partnership may have been rooted initially in military cooperation it has branched out across a wide range of common interests: from offering help to the oppressed, to sharing prosperity with our people, to protecting the oceans and the environment for our children, to forming Australian and American friendships and families together.

Like that tree, our partnership is more than just a symbol; it is a living breathing thing that needs care. Generation after generation has tended to this partnership and continually renewed it. We see this here in Darwin with the impending arrival of Marines. Instead of coming to fend off a common enemy, as they did in 1942, they come to preserve the bonds and the peace that we've formed. They will learn together, train together, eat together, and bond together with Australian friends. We will ensure that both of our nations are prepared to face together whatever challenges the future holds.

Finally, like that tree, the ultimate strength of the U.S.-Australia relationship has always come from the ground up. The relationship is solid and unbending because of the countless links and ties and roots formed at ground level between our two peoples. There is no finer climate, no better soil, where that mateship can thrive than Australia.

I look at that tree, I look at this relationship, I look at this safe and still harbor, and I think that this is the real tribute to those who perished on February 19, 1942. This is the new life we've created in their memory.

So today, we not only remember those who fought and perished in 1942. But we also honor those they inspired; those who rebuilt; those who over the last seventy years helped create a world today that our forefathers could hardly have imagined: a world in which our former enemies are now among our closest friends. We stand here in a harbor once ravaged by war, to celebrate 70 years of peace.

That is the cause to which the seamen of the USS Peary gave the very last measure of their devotion: That we would live, as they had died – free and strong, hopeful and brave.

Thank you.