



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Darwin Plaque Unveiling

**Remarks of Ambassador Bleich
at the AAA Plaque Unveiling
at Darwin Military Museum**

(As prepared for delivery – February 19, 2012)

Thank you everyone for allowing my wife Becky and me to join you here today.

I especially want to thank Jeff Dunn, Rick Setter and the membership of Australian American Association for organizing this event. The AAA has done an extraordinary job over the years honoring the role America played that fateful day seventy years ago.

Thank you also Commander Herb Kriloff, for your service as Officer on Deck of the USS Preston in these waters 70 years ago today, and for your enduring service to our nation.

A lot has been said this weekend about the historic events of February 19, 1942. This afternoon, however, I would like to focus on the personal side of those events, and what they mean for the relationship between our two countries. Because that is what the AAA is all about, building those personal ties that provide the foundation for our partnership.

That commitment to partnership is personified in the lives of two sailors who were on the USS Peary that day.

The first is Ben Greer, who was a petty officer 3rd class. He was on the bridge when the first bomb hit, piercing the deck. Ben fell two decks below and was knocked unconscious. As the blazing destroyer sank into the water, he regained consciousness and saw his crewmates still firing at Japanese planes as the ship went down. An hour later, he was pulled aboard the Australian ship the HMAS Southern Cross.

Once on board the ship, the Australians took him below deck, where he was taken to a room. According to Ben: "they had a cake down there for some guy named Bluey because it was his birthday. They were singing happy birthday while he was blowing out all the candles."

Ben said that if a bunch of guys could decide that they weren't going to let a bombing strike keep them from remembering their mate's birthday, then these were the guys he wanted to be with. Having been rescued, then fed birthday cake by the crew, Ben said:



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"I liked those guys and I knew I'd like Australians." A man of his word, Ben later married his Aussie bride and they moved back to America.

Ten years ago, Ben returned to Darwin for the 60th anniversary.

He'd found a thank you note to the crew of the Southern Cross written by one of his fellow Peary survivors. It had lain hidden for decades, tucked in the ship's logs. It read:

"To HMAS Southern Cross from Peary survivors: We wish to congratulate the officers and men of your ship for their heroic effort in rescuing us and for the kindness and friendship shown towards us."

Ben decided to go on a personal mission to say a final thank you to the Australian heroes who saved him. Ben found Michael Coogan, the Aussie sailor who helped pull him from the water. And he thanked Michael for saving his life that day.

But Michael in turn thanked Ben – he said that the Peary probably saved his own life that day as well as the lives of his crew. It was the thick black smoke from the Peary's fires that created cover for the Southern Cross to hide from the bombers.

Ben's and Michael's reunion I think captures the personal bonds that have made this alliance unique in the world. We are more than allies, we are mates. We are grateful to one another for being there, and we wish only for each other's success. Whether those bonds are formed through marriage, studying abroad, or serving side-by-side in battle, this is the fabric that holds us together and keeps us strong.

That is why the work done by groups like the AAA is so vital. From that fateful day in 1942, this relationship has grown for seventy years. But it is seventy years young, because of events like these, where you renew and refresh and revitalize this friendship year after year, from one mate to the other.

The arrival of Marines on rotation here in Darwin represents another opportunity to strengthen and renew those ties. Australian and American soldiers will be training side-by-side, under tough conditions, and discovering for themselves the resilience, the courage, the humor, and the genuine goodness that Ben Greer and Michael Coogan found in these waters 70 years ago.

The AAA remains the bridge that helps to bring us all together. Thank you for continually reaching across this wonderful Darwin community – to our veterans, to our young people, to our indigenous communities, and to Americans, Australians, and all friends.



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There is no finer tribute to our respect for one another than the desire to remain with one another. And that brings me to the other sailor from the USS Peary, who I wish to mention. His name was Dallas Widick, and he wrote the description of events that today stands at the foot of the Peary memorial. He passed away in 2008, as the last remaining survivor of the Peary. But it was his dying wish that his wife Lorna, his Australian bride, commit his ashes to sea over the USS Peary wreck so that he could spend eternity on these shores with his shipmates and his Aussie friends.

This is how we feel about one another. Our nations our people, feel safe together. We are friends. We feel welcome in each other's homes. We feel at home. And it is these feelings that are our ultimate bond.

Thank you.