

Northern Territory Library

The Fujita salvage operation

Resources Package

15/05/2019

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The Fujita Salvage Operation

1959-1961

When the Japanese bombed Darwin in 1942, no one expected they would be back to clean up 17 years later. In what became an extraordinary act of post-war reconciliation, a Japanese firm, the Fujita Salvage Company, arrived in Darwin in 1959 to remove the many large shipwrecks still in the harbour.

1. A deadly day at sea

19 February 1942

Image 1A: 1A_NTL-PH0808-0018.jpg

Onlookers observe the bombed MV *Neptuna* and SS *Barossa*, 1942: Northern Territory Library Darwin Bombing Collection PH0808/0018

On 19 February 1942 Darwin was heavily bombed by Japanese aircraft, the largest attack on modern Australia by a foreign power. At the time there were over 50 vessels in Darwin Harbour, ranging from small pearling luggers to major naval ships. The bombing sank at least seven large ships and damaged many others.

2. Ghosts in the harbour

1958

Image 2A: 2A_NTL-PH0110-0479.jpg

The MV *Neptuna* lies on its side at Stokes Hill Wharf, 1945: Northern Territory Library Christa Roderick Collection PH0110/0479

By the 1950s, there were still seven large shipwrecks in Darwin Harbour including cargo vessel MV *Neptuna*. They were an eyesore, a hazard to shipping and a barrier to future port development. The local administration lobbied the Commonwealth to do something about them, but a local contractor able to do the work could not be found.

Image 2B: 2B_NTL-PH0808-0001.jpg

The MV *Neptuna* lies on its side after the Bombing of Darwin 1942: Northern Territory Library Darwin Bombing Collection PH0808/0001

Image 2C: 2C_NTL-PH1025-0050.jpg

3. Fujita's salvage crew

1959

Image 3A: 3A_NTL-PH0874-0021.jpg

Employees of the Fujita Salvage Company, 1959: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0021

After multiple failed tendering processes, the salvage contract was finally awarded to a Japanese firm, the Fujita Salvage Company. President Ryugo Fujita and 120 workers aged between 16 and 65 arrived in Darwin Harbour on 21 July 1959. They would spend two years salvaging the sunken wrecks and processing the scrap metal to be taken back to Japan.

Image 3B: 3B_NTL-PH0874-0052.jpg

Ryugo Fujita (fifth from left) with employees of the Fujita Salvage Company, 1960: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0052

Image 3C: 3C_NTL-PH0841-0003.jpg

Employees of the Fujita Salvage Company, 1959. L-R: Kazutaka Kobayashi (Chief Operator of Salvages), Sohei Fujita (older son of Ryugo), Ryugo Fujita (President of Fujita Salvage Company), Senichiro Fujita (younger son of Ryugo), Takeichiro Yukiata (Chief of Workers): Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0841/0003

4. The mothership

1960

Image 4A: 4A_NTL-PH0092-0013.jpg

Salvaging of the MV *British Motorist*, 1959: Northern Territory Library Lois and Geoff Helyar Collection PH0092/0013

The MV *British Motorist* was the first wreck raised by the Fujita Salvage Company. It was a challenging task due to its size (over 130 metres long) and the huge tidal variations the workers had to contend with. It became home for Fujita and his crew, with makeshift bunkhouses built on the deck and a long-drop toilet installed, visible in this image.

5. Akemashite omedetou gozaimasu / Happy New Year

1961

[Image 5A: 5A_NTL-PH0874-0136.jpg](#)

Employees of the Fujita Salvage Company celebrate New Year's Day on board the MV *British Motorist*, 1961: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0136

The Fujita salvage team lived on board the MV *British Motorist* during the two-year salvage mission. One chef and four cooks fed the 120-man crew. They are pictured here celebrating New Year's Day in 1961.

6. Into the murky depths

1961

[Image 6: 6_NTL-PH0092-0022.jpg](#)

A diver from the Fujita Salvage Company, 1959. Northern Territory Library Lois and Geoff Helyar Collection PH0092/0022

Divers would descend into the water to cut and blast the scrap metal into large sections using dynamite and underwater gas torches. The skills of these professional divers were often intergenerational and their craft was greatly respected by Darwin locals. But it was dangerous work and one diver died during the salvage operation.

7. Raising the wrecks

1961

[Image 7A: 7A_NTL-PH0969_0097.jpg](#)

Salvage vessels of the Fujita Salvage Company, 1961: Northern Territory Library Arnold Bismark Collection PH0969/0097

After the divers broke the wrecks into pieces, a floating barge crane was used to lift each section to the surface.

[Image 7B: 7B_NTL-PH0874-0144.jpg](#)

The Fujita Salvage Operation, 1961: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0144

[Image 7C: 7C_NTL-PH0874-0120.jpg](#)

Winches on board the floating barge crane of the Fujita Salvage Company, 1960: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0120

[Image 7D: 7D_NTL-PH0088-0080.jpg](#)

8. A precision mission

1961

Image 8A: 8A_NTL-PH0874-0155.jpg

Salvage materials near Fort Hill Wharf, 1961: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita
Collection PH0874/0155

Once on the surface, the scrap was further broken down and neatly stacked, awaiting transport to Japan. Each stack contained about 100 pieces of salvaged metal and weighed 30 tonnes.

Document D8: D8_NTL-MS52-4.pdf

Salvage timeline: Northern Territory Library Fujita Salvage Company Manuscript Collection,
1959-1960 MS52-4

9. Ships and other scrap

1961

Image 9A: 9A_NTL-PH0874-0148.jpg

Sohei Fujita, son of President Ryugo Fujita of the Fujita Salvage Company with one of two 9.2-inch counter-bombardment guns at East Point prior to their salvage, 1961: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0148

As well as salvaging the sunken ships, the Fujita team acquired huge amounts of scrap metal on land, including the two 9.2-inch counter-bombardment guns situated at East Point. Cut into foot-long pieces, the mounts, cradles, and associated equipment were also salvaged.

Image 9B: 9B_NTL-PH0874-0073.jpg

The Fujita Salvage Company salvaging materials from Larrimah south of Darwin, 1960:
Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0073

10. Friendships grow

1961

Image 10A: 10A_NTL-PH0874-0126.jpg

Darwin residents dining with Fujita Salvage Company staff on board the MV *British Motorist*, 1961: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0126

Although anti-Japanese sentiment was strong throughout Darwin in the 1950s, many prominent Darwin figures were invited aboard the *British Motorist* to dine with Ryugo Fujita and his family during the salvage operation. Visitors were treated to Japanese beer and sushi, a rarity in Australia at that time.

Image 10B: 10B_NTL-PH0874-0134.jpg

Darwin residents dining with Fujita Salvage Company staff on board the MV *British Motorist*, 1961: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0134

Image 10C: 10C_NTL-PH0874-0168.jpg

Reception on board the MV *British Motorist* for Governor-General, Lord Rt Hon. William Shepherd Morrison, 1st Viscount Dunrossil, GCMG, MC, QC, Lady Dunrossil and Dame Pattie Menzies, 1961: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0168

Image 10D: 10D_NTL-PH0874-0060.jpg

Darwin residents tour the MV *British Motorist*, 1960: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0060

11. A parting gift

1960

Image 11A: 11A_MB_UnitingChurchCrosses.jpg

Fujita's bronze crosses at the Darwin Memorial Uniting Church, 2016: Photographer Michael Barritt, Copyright Michael Barritt.

The salvage operations coincided with the building of the Darwin Memorial Uniting Church on Smith Street in Darwin. In a spirit of generosity, Fujita commissioned 77 bronze crosses for the church from scrap they had salvaged from the MV *Zealandia*. Ryugo Fujita spoke at the official opening of the church on 23 July 1960.

Image 11B: 11B_NTL-PH0520-0006.jpg

Ryugo Fujita at the opening of the Darwin Memorial Uniting Church for which he donated 77 bronze crosses crafted from metal from the salvaged ship the MV *Zealandia*: Northern Territory Library June Truskett Collection PH0520/0006

Image 11BR: 11BR_NTL-PH0520-0006.jpg

Reverse of photo - Ryugo Fujita at the opening of the Darwin Memorial Uniting Church for which he donated 77 bronze crosses crafted from metal from the salvaged ship the MV *Zealandia*: Northern Territory Library June Truskett Collection PH0520/0006

12. His life's great work

1963

Image 12A: 12A_NTL-PH0874-0001.jpg

Fujita family tombstone in Ashiya, Japan, featuring a propeller blade from the USAT *Meigs* in 1963: Northern Territory Library Senichiro Fujita Collection PH0874/0001

Ryugo Fujita considered the salvage operations in Darwin Harbour to be his life's great work. His tombstone in Japan was marked by a blade from the propeller of the USAT *Meigs* transport ship salvaged from Darwin Harbour. It stood as a monument at his grave until 2017 when the blade was returned to Darwin.

Document D12: D12_NTL-MS52-1_6.pdf

Correspondence from Roger Nott, Administrator Darwin NT to Mr. R. Fujita, 1961: Northern Territory Library Fujita Salvage Company Manuscript Collection, 1959-1960 MS52-1_6

13. Fujita's photo album

2010

[Photograph not available for download]

Hundreds of photographs were taken during the salvage operation. In 2010, Ryugo Fujita's son, Senichiro, who also took part in the salvage operation, returned to Darwin, donating over 200 photographs, films and documents to the Northern Territory Library.

Links

[Northern Territory Library Fujita Salvage Company Manuscript Collection, 1959-1960. MS52](#)

14. Dig Deeper and Discover More

Territory Stories

Search our specialist digital collection featuring rare images, manuscripts, maps, and newspapers relating to the Fujita salvage operation.

Places of interest

Click [here](#) to reveal a map of places of interest you might like to visit relating to the Fujita salvage operation.

Darwin Memorial Uniting Church

<https://www.ns.uca.org.au/congregations/darwin-memorial-uniting-church/>

View the bronze crosses made by Ryugo Fujita at Darwin Memorial Church. A blade from the USAT Meigs that was once on Ryugo Fujita's grave site is now displayed on the lawn outside the church.

Dive the Wrecks

<https://seadarwin.com/diving/>

Explore the remaining war wrecks by taking a scheduled dive in Darwin Harbour.

HMAT Zealandia

Built: 1910

Sunk: 19/2/1942

Salvaged: 1959/60

Remains: Collapsed plating

https://seadarwin.com/uploads/Diving/SeaDarwin_HMATZealandia_DiveCard.pdf

USAT Munana Loa

Built: 1919

Sunk: 19 February 1942.

Salvaged: 1959/60

Remains: Cargo including jeeps and guns

https://seadarwin.com/uploads/Diving/SeaDarwin_USATMaunaLoa_DiveCard.pdf

USAT Meigs

Built: 1921

Sunk: 19/2/1942

Salvaged: 1959/1960

Remains: Trucks, Bren gun carriers.

https://seadarwin.com/uploads/Diving/SeaDarwin_USATMeigs_DiveCard.pdf

USS Peary

Built: 1920

Sunk: 19/2/1942

Salvaged: 1960

Remains: Lower sections in upright position

https://seadarwin.com/uploads/Diving/SeaDarwin_USSPeary_DiveCard.pdf

Defence of Darwin Experience / Darwin Military Museum

<http://www.defenceofdarwin.nt.gov.au/>

<http://www.darwinmilitarymuseum.com.au/>

An immersive, interactive, multimedia experience, the Defence of Darwin Experience tells the story of Darwin's role in the Second World War. Explore vast collections of uniforms, weaponry, photographs, vehicles and artillery.

Stokes Hill Wharf

<https://www.waterfront.nt.gov.au/darwin-waterfront-precinct/stokes-hill-wharf/>

Enjoy panoramic views of the harbour, which was once littered with shipwrecks, such as the MV *Neptuna*, which lay wrecked beside the wharf until the Fujita Salvage Operation.

Discover LibrariesNT

Through our catalogue you can find resources held by NTL or expand your search to Libraries Worldwide and find resources held by other collecting institutions about the Fujita salvage operation.

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