

Allied co-operation in Brisbane remembered at UQ symposium

The University of Queensland was the setting for a remarkable gathering on 30–31 August 2025 to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in the Pacific. The international symposium *Allied Co-operation in Brisbane during WWII: Australia, USA, Netherlands, UK* drew a full house of delegates, researchers, community representatives, and descendants. Hosted by the Camp Columbia Heritage Association (CCHA), the event highlighted Brisbane's overlooked wartime significance and the intertwined histories of four Allied nations.

The symposium was preceded by a civic reception at Brisbane City Hall on Friday 29 August, generously hosted by the Lord Mayor, the Right Honourable Adrian Schrinner. At this reception Councillor Sarah Hutton, representing the Lord Mayor, warmly welcomed delegates, and the CCHA received a written acknowledgement from the Lord Mayor himself, recognising the association's work in preserving and promoting this unique history.

The program was supported by a vibrant exhibition and banner display, with the centrepiece a 19th-century ceremonial sword discovered at Camp Columbia in 2022. This unique artefact, likely the only tangible link to the Netherlands East Indies government-in-exile established in Brisbane, drew much attention and symbolised the symposium's cross-national focus.

Day one – the role of the four Allies in Brisbane

The symposium opened with a Welcome to Country by Aunty Theresa, followed by greetings from dignitaries including the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, H.E. Ardi Stoios-Braken; Speaker of the House of Representatives Milton Dick; Councillor Sarah Hutton for the Lord Mayor of Brisbane; and Colonel Andrew Clark, Army Attaché for the U.S. Mission to Australia.

Professor Ian Lilley (University of Queensland) offered his welcome, noting UQ's archaeological work at Camp Columbia in 2022 and pointing out that several university buildings still provide a direct link to Brisbane's wartime past. His remarks underlined UQ's role as a research partner and custodian of heritage connected to the city's WWII history.

The first keynote, delivered by Emeritus Professor David Horner (ANU), set the stage by tracing the strategic and political elements that showed how Queensland became both the frontline of Australia's defence and the launchpad for Allied offensives in New Guinea and beyond.

The day's sessions provided a comprehensive overview of Brisbane's military functions:

- Roger Marks charted Queensland's extensive wartime airfields.
- David Jones explained how the British Pacific Fleet used Brisbane as a supply hub.
- Meghan Adams highlighted Brisbane's naval role in repair and resupply.
- David Duffy introduced the Central Bureau, Australia's own "Bletchley Park."
- Ethan Devereux-Phillips guided delegates through the exhibition's artefacts.
- Gerard Benjamin told the story of New Farm's U.S. submarine base.
- Alan Graham revisited the Allied Technical Air Intelligence Unit at Hangar 7.

- Richard Walding detailed Moreton Bay's naval defences.

The closing panel discussion was chaired by Paul Budde, with speakers reflecting on how the war transformed Brisbane and what lessons remain relevant today.

Day two – the war's end and Dutch perspectives

The second day turned to international and post-war perspectives. Dr Paul Jac Verhoeven, director of Museum Bronbeek in Arnhem, delivered an excellent keynote on the Netherlands East Indies, decolonisation, and the legacy of exile in Australia. He also provided unique documents relating to the Dutch occupation of Camp Columbia.

The morning sessions examined archives and historiography:

- Dr Neville Buch honoured the life and work of historian Dr Jack Ford, delivering a moving eulogy attended by Jack's widow Brenda and his daughter Leela. Neville also reflected on *Allies in a Bind*, Jack's groundbreaking study of Dutch–Australian wartime relations. Thanks to the support of Marcus Fielding (Superscript Publishing Pty Ltd), Jack's book will soon be republished.
- Georgina Devlin presented the outcomes of new research undertaken for the symposium, highlighting Netherlands East Indies records in the National Archives.
- Robyn Vandyk likewise shared fresh findings from her research into Dutch perspectives preserved in the Australian War Memorial.

The afternoon broadened the focus:

- Nonja Peters spoke on Dutch military women (Women's Army Corps) at Camp Columbia.
- Jan Lingard described Indonesian exiles in wartime Australia.
- Professor Adrian Vickers analysed Indonesians' anti-fascist struggle in Brisbane and showed the role Camp Columbia played in this history.

Perhaps the most moving session came with personal stories. Artist Frances Larder shared her family's experiences as Buitenkampers. Renée Belloni recounted her father's survival as a prisoner of war. Nonja Peters described the work of the Netherlands Indies Welfare Organisation for Evacuees at Fairbridge Farm. The silence in the room testified to the impact of these stories — “you could hear a pin drop.”

Closing discussions – from remembrance to strategy

The symposium concluded with lively and forward-looking discussions. Two clear strategies emerged:

1. Promoting Brisbane's wartime role

There was strong consensus that Brisbane's status as the Allied capital of Australia during WWII must be better recognised, both nationally and internationally. Political

dignitaries present at the symposium voiced their support for this initiative. Achieving it will require collaboration across organisations, researchers, and government partners.

Several practical directions were suggested. One is to use this theme at the *Talisman Sabre* exercise in 2027, Australia's largest bilateral defence exercise, which will include all four Allies featured in the symposium. Another long-term goal is to develop a high-quality heritage attraction that can showcase Brisbane's role as Allied capital during the 2032 Brisbane Olympics, providing both international visibility and a lasting legacy.

2. Strengthening the CCHA team

Several participants expressed interest in becoming actively involved with the Camp Columbia Heritage Association. This includes people willing to contribute at the strategic level as well as those keen to assist with research and educational activities. A meeting to formalise these commitments is planned for the near future.

Further outcomes also emerged:

- Program chair Professor Nonja Peters will work with speakers to produce an e-book of the symposium papers, included in the sponsoring of the Netherlands Embassy.
- Several speakers contributed new research material on Camp Columbia, which will soon be added to the CCHA website, significantly enriching the stories we tell.
- A long-term goal will be to trace lists of people who worked or stayed at Camp Columbia, offering descendants a tangible way to connect with their forebears.
- Thanks to the support of the Hon. Milton Dick MP, Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Camp Columbia Heritage Association received confirmation of a **\$20,000 grant from the Federal Government**, providing vital resources to advance commemoration and education projects.

Touring Brisbane's wartime sites

On the following day, participants joined a guided bus tour to key wartime locations across Brisbane. Archaeologist Ethan Devereux-Phillips provided an excellent contextual introduction, explaining the wider war in the Pacific and the reasons behind Japan's disastrous and destructive campaign, which ultimately claimed millions of lives.

The tour included visits to the Anzac Square Memorial Galleries, the MacArthur Museum (with a presentation by its Managing Director John Wright), the Trade Coast Central Heritage Centre (with a presentation by Bob Tucker), and Hangar 7 (with a presentation by Alan Graham). A stop at Pooh Corner — the site of Camp Columbia — provided a fitting conclusion, with discussion of future heritage trail plans.

Social connections

Equally important were the opportunities for delegates to connect informally. A dinner at Saint Lucy Caffè e Cucina on the UQ campus and drinks at the Regatta Hotel created a lively atmosphere where participants deepened networks and friendships, strengthening the foundation for future collaboration.

Conclusion – legacies and future directions

The symposium achieved its goal of recognising Brisbane's central wartime role and of bringing Dutch, Australian, American, and British perspectives together. It combined rigorous scholarship with personal testimony, bridging military history with human experience.

Equally important, it has sparked new momentum: building wider recognition of Brisbane's place as the Allied wartime capital, republishing key scholarship, producing an e-book of fresh research, and expanding the CCHA team. With new knowledge and new energy, the work of remembrance is moving decisively into a shared strategic future.