

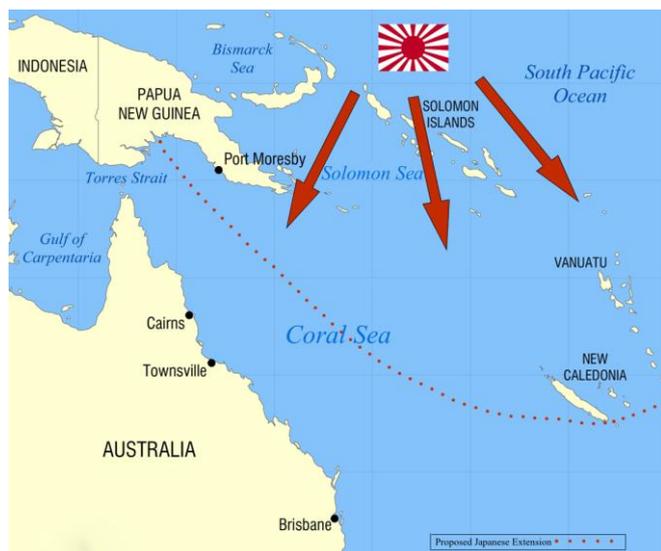
COMMEMORATING THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

Some Australians are unfamiliar with the location of the Coral Sea, a sea which laps north Queensland's shoreline, and the scene of a major naval action fought 75 years ago during a particularly dark period of the Second World War.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was not a single battle but a series of actions fought from 4–8 May 1942, chiefly between Imperial Japanese forces and a coalition of US and Australian naval forces supported by US and Australian land-based air forces in Queensland. It proved to be one of the most important naval actions of the early Pacific war and was to have far-reaching strategic consequences for the Japanese.

Following Japan's entry into the war in December 1941, its armed forces had, by May 1942, achieved a string of victories as they seized territory throughout Asia and much of the Pacific Ocean. During this rapid advance Japanese forces were virtually unstoppable and much of that success was due to the lethal use of naval air power which had proven instrumental in victories ranging from Pearl Harbor in the Pacific Ocean, to Colombo in the Indian Ocean.

In April 1942, Allied intelligence became aware of Japanese plans to dispatch invasion forces to take the Solomon Islands with a view to launching further assaults from there on New Caledonia, the New Hebrides and Fiji. Port Moresby, on the southern shore of New Guinea, was also a threat to Japanese interests and a decision was made that it too should be taken to secure the Japanese southern perimeter.



An illustration of the proposed Japanese extension aimed at isolating Australia.

Achieving these objectives would sever communications between Australia and the United States and severely limit Australia's ability to continue to wage war. At the same time, a decision was made to mount a strike on the American island of Midway, aimed at luring US aircraft

carriers into a decisive battle that would eliminate them as a threat to Japan once and for all.

Predicated on a successful outcome, plans for the capture of Port Moresby (Operation MO) were made in early May 1942. This would allow sufficient time for Japanese forces to reconstitute in time for the Midway operation planned for the following month.

In overall command of Operation MO was Vice Admiral Shigeyoshi Inoue, flying his flag in the light cruiser *Kashima* at Rabaul. He had at his disposal a supporting force comprising two large aircraft carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, three cruisers and six destroyers, together with a smaller carrier the *Shoho* which, with seven cruisers and seven destroyers, would cover the transports carrying Japanese troops to Port Moresby.

In response to this new threat, Allied naval forces were directed to rendezvous in the Coral Sea to counter the planned invasions. Two US aircraft carrier groups were made available, Task Force 17 (Rear Admiral F Fletcher, USN) centred on USS *Yorktown*; and Task Force 11 (Rear Admiral A Fitch, USN) centred on USS *Lexington*. Each task force included attendant cruisers, destroyers and auxiliaries, collectively numbering more than 20 ships.

Australia's contribution comprised the heavy cruiser HMAS *Australia* (II) (Captain HB Farncomb, RAN) and the light cruiser HMAS *Hobart* (I) (Captain HL Howden, RAN). Together with the US Navy ships *Chicago*, *Farragut*, *Walke* and *Perkins* they formed Task Force 44 under the tactical command of Australian born Rear Admiral JG Crace, RN, flying his flag in *Australia*. Between 2-3 May the Allied forces concentrated in the Coral Sea in readiness.

On 3 May the Japanese forces caught the Allies by surprise, landing at Tulagi in the Solomon Islands. In response, an air strike was launched from *Yorktown* the following day achieving only moderate results. On 6 May the Allied force was consolidated as Task Force 17 and Admiral Crace's task force was redesignated Task Group 17.3. Throughout the remainder of 6 May the opposing Allied and Japanese forces searched in vain for each other in poor weather with limited visibility.

Early the following morning the Australian task group was detached with orders to proceed independently to attack the Port Moresby invasion force reported to be heading for the Jomard Passage near the south-eastern tip of New Guinea. This was a decision not made lightly by Fletcher who knew that the task group would be vulnerable to enemy air attack with no fighter protection of its own. Crace subsequently steamed at high speed positioning his ships to the south of Jomard Passage early in the afternoon of 7 May.

As feared, the Japanese were quick to detect the presence of Crace's task group which soon came under attack from successive waves of enemy aircraft. Through skilful ship handling no ships in the task group were

seriously damaged and the enemy attacks were successfully beaten off with several aircraft shot down or damaged. Meanwhile Fletcher's aircraft, in search of the main Japanese carrier groups, found and sank the smaller aircraft carrier *Shoho* covering the invasion convoy while Japanese aircraft discovered and crippled the oiler *Neosho* and sank the destroyer USS *Sims*.



The disposition of the opposing naval forces. Neither fleet was to sight the other during the course of the battle.

On 8 May the two opposing carrier forces discovered each other's whereabouts and in the fierce air strikes that followed, *Lexington* was lost and *Yorktown* badly damaged necessitating her withdrawal to Pearl Harbor to effect urgent replenishment and repairs.

Damage inflicted on the Japanese included the carrier *Shokaku* being put out of action and withdrawn to Kure for repairs and *Zuikaku*, having lost many of her best aircrew and aircraft, being recalled to Japan to resupply. Neither was available to take part in the Battle of Midway in June 1942 which proved a decisive victory for the Americans.



A US destroyer goes to the aid of the crippled Lexington, 8 May 1942.

The outcome of the Coral Sea battles completely disorganised the Japanese seaborne invasion plans for Port Moresby and although Task Group 17.3 did not directly engage the Port Moresby landing force, its presence was pivotal in influencing the Japanese decision to abandon the effort, putting an end to Japan's southward expansion by sea. The enemy was consequently forced to attempt to capture Port Moresby by land, leading to the battles at Milne Bay and Kokoda.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was the first naval battle in history in which the opposing naval surface forces did not sight each other and in which the only offensive weapons used were aircraft. The encounter proved a limited tactical victory for the Japanese but was an important strategic victory for the Allies, providing an enormous fillip to Allied morale at a time when the future had never appeared bleaker.

As Australia and the US reflect on this important action and the long-standing alliance between the two countries, four Australian Coral Sea veterans will travel to New York in early May to participate in a commemorative dinner on board the former World War II aircraft carrier USS *Intrepid*, now the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. There, in the company of US veterans of the battle, the memory of the more than 580 US Navy personnel who made the supreme sacrifice will be remembered.

John Perryman



Telegraphist Gordon Johnson who served in HMAS Hobart as part of Task Group 17.3 and who will join other veterans in New York to commemorate the battle.



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