

BOOK REVIEW:

South Pacific air war. Volume 3, Coral Sea & aftermath, May-June 1942

by Michael Claringbould and Peter Ingman

Avonmore Books: Kent Town, South Australia; 2019; 247 pp; ISBN 9780994588999 (softcover); RRP \$46.95



The Battle of the Coral Sea, well-known to Australians, has been recounted by numerous historians. This book, however, differs from earlier volumes on the subject by providing a complete coverage of the air-sea battles in the South Pacific during the months of May and June 1942.

The authors are uniquely qualified to recount and assess this air and sea campaign. Raised in Port Moresby, Michael Claringbould is a globally-acknowledged expert on the New Guinea conflict and both Japanese and United States Army Air Force aviation of this period. Peter Ingman is an acclaimed author of military history specializing in the early part of the Pacific War. They have published two earlier volumes on the Air War in the South Pacific: *The Fall of Rabaul* (Avonmore Books, 2017), and *The Struggle for Moresby* (Avonmore Books, 2018).

The Battle of the Coral Sea was not a stand-alone event. The complete action involved land-based aviation, both Allied and Japanese, in the air campaigns over New Guinea and against the carrier forces. The authors have brought together the campaigns conducted before and during the carrier battle, discussing the objectives of these campaigns and their ultimate effect on the way the battle was fought by both sides. They have meticulously recorded the battles and skirmishes within the various campaigns and presented them in an easy-to-read style.

The objective of the campaign conducted by the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) was the capture of Port Moresby so as to sever the umbilical cord between the United States and Australia and starve Australia of the means of waging war against Japan. The Japanese campaign plans were supported by five separate naval groups. Their intermediate objectives were: the capture of Tulagai, capital of the British Solomon Islands; the bombing of airfields at Port Moresby and its ultimate possession; and the capture of Nauru and Ocean Island.

From the perspective of the United States Navy, the Battle of the Coral Sea provided an opportunity to destroy the Imperial Japanese Navy carrier force, while for the Japanese the intent was the to clear the path for their strategic goal, the isolation of Australia.

The book is a very well written and the authors have brought a sense of excitement and anticipation to the individual combat actions. They also convey the sense of frustration arising from missed opportunities by both

sides and, in some cases, the ineffectiveness of particular combat systems, such as land-based aircraft attacks against the Japanese fleets. The deft use of break-out boxes listing the forces committed to these engagements enables the reader to maintain an overall understanding of the size, capability and advantage of each force at the time of each action.

The volume is a high-quality production with excellent colour plates and descriptions of the main aircraft types engaged in the battle, and a comprehensive set of black-and-white photographs taken at the time of the conflict. Contained within the appendices are lists of every Allied and Japanese aircraft lost during the period of the conflict. The losses are accompanied with explanations of how and why they occurred. Also included are listings of accumulative aircraft losses so that the reader may understand the progress and advantage achieved by each side over the course of the battles.

The authors have identified individual combatants on both sides of the conflict, as well as those who perished, and in doing so have personalised this history. For example, the book includes a dramatic account of the sinking of the Imperial Japanese Navy carrier *Shoho* from a Japanese perspective.

The Battle of the Coral Sea is generally viewed by historians as a tactical victory for the Japanese, but as a strategic victory for the Allies, as it denied the Japanese their objective of capturing Port Moresby. The authors' proposition, however, is that the battle did not "deny" the Japanese the opportunity to capture Port Moresby. Rather, the Japanese made a major strategic error in not continuing their invasion campaign after they had sunk the USS *Lexington* and the American naval forces had withdrawn to Pearl Harbour to prepare for the coming battle at Midway. The Imperial Japanese Navy certainly still had the forces and resources to capture Port Moresby.

Coral Sea & Aftermath, May- June 1942 provides a comprehensive account of the carrier battles, the air battles over New Guinea and Northern Australia, and enemy surface and submarine action along the eastern coast of Australia, as well as air-sea rescues of downed Allied airmen and shipwrecked sailors. A compact and comprehensive account of the South Pacific air and sea war over the months of May and June in 1942, it will appeal to all readers who have even a passing interest in military history. A most enjoyable read.

Bob Treloar