

The Battle of the Coral Sea, May 1942

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The Battle of the Coral Sea, 4-8 May 1942, was fought between combined United States and Australian naval forces and the Imperial Japanese Navy. It was the world's first sea battle between aircraft carriers – literally 'fought in the air'. It was also the first naval battle in which opposing ships neither saw nor fired on each other. It resulted in the Japanese Port Moresby invasion fleet being turned back to Rabaul.

Key words: World War II; Australia; Japan; United States; Coral Sea; Imperial Japanese Navy; Royal Australian Navy; United States Navy.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was the first joint Australian/American military operation after John Curtin's article 'The Task Ahead' was published in *The Herald* (Melbourne) on 27 December 1941. In that article, Curtin wrote:

"The Australian Government, therefore, regards the Pacific struggle as primarily one in which the United States and Australia must have the fullest say in the direction of the democracies' fighting plan.

Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.

We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces. We know the constant threat of invasion. We know the dangers of dispersal of strength, but we know too, that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on."

This changed forever Australia's relationship with the United Kingdom, which could no longer be relied upon to defend Australia. The surrender of Singapore on 15 February 1942 was evidence of that. Curtin saw that Australia's survival in the war against Japan could only be achieved in concert with the United States, with the United States being the dominant ally.

Japanese Strategic Plan

Japanese strategic intentions in the Pacific were to:

- destroy the United States Navy aircraft carrier fleet at Pearl Harbour;
- invade Southeast Asia and Java, securing oil fields and other precious natural resources; and
- then turn towards Burma and India.

Two important factors, however, changed this plan. Firstly, the Japanese were emboldened by their unexpectedly rapid string of military successes in Southeast Asia; and secondly, their plans were thrown into

confusion by a surprise bombing raid on Japan on 18 April 1942 carried out by Lieutenant-Colonel Jimmy Doolittle of the United States Army Air Force.

Lieutenant-Colonel Doolittle's daring bombing raid, besides raising American morale so soon after Pearl Harbour, caused great consternation for Japan's senior military leaders. As a result, instead of invading India at this time, they decided first to expand eastward across the Pacific towards Midway and southward towards Australia. This would provide a buffer around Japan, preventing another such raid on their homeland.

The Japanese Advances

In the event, while the Imperial Japanese Navy inflicted considerable damage on the United States Navy's battleships at Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, crucially, they failed to engage the United States Navy's aircraft carriers which were at sea on the day of the attack.

Despite this failure, the Japanese rapidly advanced through South-East Asia and Micronesia to New Britain and the northern Solomon Islands. Map 1 shows the Japanese advances into the South-West Pacific and Map 2 shows the area they had occupied by May 1942.



Map 1: Japanese advances into the South-West Pacific Area, 1941-42 [Source: Wikimedia commons]

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Map 2: The area occupied by Japanese forces by May 1942
 [Source: Wikimedia commons]

Operation MO

Having established a strong base at Rabaul on the north coast of New Britain, the Japanese now planned to isolate Australia and New Zealand from their ally the United States and to take Australia out of the war, possibly with a view to eventually invading Australia. The first step, Operation MO (Moresby Operation), was the Japanese plan to capture Port Moresby from the sea and to take control of Papua.

The commander of the Japanese 4th Fleet was Vice-Admiral Shigeyoshi Inoue. For Operation MO, Inoue divided his forces into four groups: a Port Moresby Invasion Group; a Carrier Striking Force; a Tulagi Invasion Group; and a Covering Force.

Inoue appreciated that he needed a forward base on Tulagi Island in the Solomons to protect the southern flank of the invasion force. On the island, he planned to set up a sea-plane base from which sea-planes would fly south and east on reconnaissance patrols and also protect the flank of the Carrier Striking Force entering the Coral Sea from the Solomon Islands.

The United States Navy's signals intelligence unit at Corregidor Island in the Philippines had been transferred to Melbourne before the Philippines fell. It was now a combined United States Navy/Royal Australian Navy unit known as Fleet Radio Unit Melbourne (FRUMEL). On 28 March 1942, FRUMEL decoded a message: "... the objective of MO will be first to restrict the enemy fleet movements and will be accomplished by means of attacks on the north coast of Australia".

Opposing Forces

The United States and Australia could not allow Japan to capture Port Moresby and assembled a fleet to prevent this. The opposing fleets assembled for the inevitable battle in the Coral Sea were the Japanese 4th Fleet and the Allied Task Forces 11 and 17. In capital ships, the two fleets were nearly equal, with the Japanese having one more carrier, the light carrier *Shoho*, and two more destroyers, than the Allies had. As well, the Japanese 4th Fleet had a dozen small ships more than as had the

Allied fleet. Ship numbers by type in the opposing fleets are tabulated below.

Japan	Allies
2 x fleet carriers	2 x fleet carriers
1 x light carrier	
9 x cruisers	9 x cruisers <i>incl.</i> RAN cruisers
15 x destroyers	13 x destroyers
5 x minesweepers	
2 x minelayers	
2 x submarine chasers	
3 x gunboats	
1 x oil tanker	2 x oilers
1 x seaplane tender	1 x seaplane tender
12 x transports	
127 x carrier aircraft	128 x carrier aircraft

The forces were equal in aircraft, both in numbers and capability, although the Allies had the added advantage of land-based bombers from the United States Army Air Force 19th Heavy Bombardment Group based at Townsville. This bomber group was tasked with making long-range bombing attacks on Japanese naval forces gathering north of the Louisiade Archipelago. The respective aircraft types are tabulated below.

Type	Japan	Allies
Fighters	Mitsubishi A6M 'Zero'	Grumman F4F 'Wildcat'
Torpedo Bombers	Nakajima B5N 'Kate'	Douglas TBD 'Devastator'
Dive Bombers	Aichi D3A 'Val'	Douglas SBD 'Dauntless'
Land-based Bombers		B-17 Flying Fortress

The commander of the Japanese 4th Fleet, Vice-Admiral Shigeyoshi Inoue, in 1940 had been commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy Aviation Bureau. He had been highly critical of the navy's shipbuilding programme, with its emphasis on battleships over aircraft carriers.

Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander-in-chief of the United States Pacific Fleet, deployed his two available carrier groups for this operation. Task Force 11, commanded by Rear-Admiral Aubrey Fitch USN, was centred on the carrier USS *Lexington*; and Task Force 17, commanded by Vice-Admiral Frank Fletcher USN, was centred on the carrier USS *Yorktown*.

Fletcher assumed command of Task Force 17 at the start of 1942. He learned air operations at sea while co-operating with Vice-Admiral Frank Halsey's Task Force 8 in mounting raids against the Marshall and Gilbert Islands in February 1942. Task Force 17 was organized into two groups:

- Attack Group – Rear-Admiral Thomas Kinkaid USN, consisting of 5 cruisers and 5 destroyers; and
- Support Group – Rear-Admiral John Crace RN², consisting of 3 cruisers and 2 destroyers.

Additionally, lying directly in the path of the first Japanese task force was the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Advanced Operating Base at Tulagi, manned by a combined force of No. 11 Squadron RAAF, operating

²Rear-Admiral Crace, a Royal Naval officer, was Australian-born.

Catalina flying-boats, and army commandos of the Australian 2/1st Independent Company.

The Battle

Operation MO commenced on 3 May 1942 and the inevitable resulting battle in the Coral Sea lasted for 6 days. Map 3 shows the initial fleet movements. The major subsidiary actions are described briefly below.

1 May 1942

- Despite heavy Japanese air raids from land-based bombers operating from Rabaul, No. 11 Squadron RAAF continues to operate until the Japanese invasion force is within 35 miles of the island.
- These operations include the first offensive action taken by the Allies in the lead-up to the Coral Sea battle – a daring attack on the Japanese landing ships, carried out by Flying Officer Bob Hirst and the crew of Catalina A24-14.

2 May 1942

- Australian aircraft and personnel are safely evacuated from Tulagi.

3 May 1942

- Japanese landing forces, supported by a small task force led by the light carrier *Shoho*, invade the tiny island of Tulagi to set up a sea-plane base.
- Aircraft from USS *Yorktown*, alerted to the Japanese presence by RAAF surveillance and Australian coastwatchers, launch air raids which destroy or damage several of the Japanese surface vessels. More importantly, five of the six Japanese F1M2 'Pete' reconnaissance floatplanes, which had arrived at Tulagi immediately after its seizure, are also destroyed.
- The loss of these aircraft greatly diminishes the later ability of the Japanese to locate and track the American aircraft carriers.

4 May 1942

- The USS *Yorktown* moves up to south of Guadalcanal and launches four air raids on the Tulagi landing force, sinking a destroyer and a transport ship. The transport ships retreat, leaving the landing force on the island.
- The Japanese carrier strike force reaches the Coral Sea.
- Task Force 17 Support Group reaches the Coral Sea.

5-6 May 1942

- United States Task Force 11 and the Task Force 17 Attack Group join the Task Force 17 Support Group in the Coral Sea.
- The oiler USS *Neosho* and the destroyer USS *Sims* move away from the fleet.
- The Japanese carrier strike force moves south-east of Guadalcanal.
- Both fleets search for each other with reconnaissance flights.

- Three B-17s from 19th Heavy Bombardment Group bomb and miss the *Shoho*.



Map 3: The Battle of the Coral Sea, showing initial fleet movements [Source: Pike 2015]

7 May 1942

- The Moresby Invasion Fleet continues a south-east course towards the Coral Sea.
- Task Force 17 Support Group positions itself to block the channels through the Louisiade Archipelago into the Coral Sea and thence to Port Moresby.
- A United States navy pilot spots the *Shoho*; and the *Yorktown* and the *Lexington* launch attacks on the *Shoho*. United States carrier-based planes bomb and torpedo the *Shoho*. A United States navy pilot radios back “scratch one flat top”.
- A Japanese pilot spots the *Neosho* and the *Sims* and reports them as the main Allied task force. Both Japanese carriers launch a massive air strike, sinking the *Sims* and severely damaging *Neosho*, leaving her dead in the water.
- Rear-Admiral Crace manoeuvres his Support Group to cut off the Japanese troop ships from passing through the Louisiade Archipelago into the Coral Sea. Lacking any air cover, he moves his ships into a diamond formation to concentrate their fire. Eleven Japanese bombers attack the Support Group; five bombers are destroyed. A second high-level bombing attack by the Japanese fails to sink any Allied ships.
- The Support Group is mistakenly attacked by three B-17s from the 19th Heavy Bombardment Group. The attack, at 1519 hours, immediately follows the unsuccessful Japanese air attacks but it does no damage to the Allied ships³.

8 May 1942

- Early in the morning both fleets are spotted and launch simultaneous attacks on each other. The

Americans severely damage the *Shokaku*. The Japanese severely damage the *Yorktown* and the *Lexington*.

- Damage crews on the *Lexington* succeed in restoring the carrier to operational condition. Sparks from an electric motor, however, ignite a fire which leads to a series of fuel-related explosions. In a short time, the resulting fires become uncontrollable. Captain F. C. Sherman orders *Lexington* abandoned. *Lexington* sinks.
- In the USS *Yorktown*, damage crews are able to prevent the ship sinking. The *Yorktown* later sails to Hawaii under its own steam for repairs.
- The Moresby Invasion Fleet and the remnants of the *Shoho* Task Force break off the engagements, turn around and return to Rabaul.

The Result

As a result of the Battle of the Coral Sea, the planned seaborne invasion of Port Moresby by Japanese amphibious forces had been thwarted and the Japanese Empire's advance through the Pacific had been stopped.

The Imperial Japanese Navy had lost a light carrier and a destroyer, whereas the United States Navy had lost a fleet carrier, a destroyer and an oiler. The Japanese Navy also had lost 72 per cent of its carrier-borne aircraft compared to the United States Navy's loss of 54 per cent of its carrier-borne aircraft.

More fundamentally, for the first time, the Japanese had been stopped at sea. The American-Australian alliance now had the measure of the Imperial Japanese Navy and had smashed its aura of invincibility.

Neither of the Japanese fleet carriers, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, would fight at the coming battle of Midway, whereas the *Yorktown* would be hastily repaired at Pearl Harbour and would take part in the battle.

On 8 May 1942, Australia's prime minister, John Curtin, in a national address reporting the Battle of the Coral Sea, urged the nation "... to make a sober and realistic estimate of their duty to the nation ... Men are fighting for Australia today. Those who are not fighting have no excuse for not working."

The Aftermath

The Battle of Coral Sea had a major influence on the decisive Battle of Midway on 4-7 June 1942. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander-in-chief of the Japanese combined fleet, erroneously thought that two United States aircraft carriers had been sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea. Unbeknown to Yamamoto, the carrier USS *Yorktown* had only been damaged in the battle, and it would be repaired and would be fully operational before

³The attack came from the south-west at about 25,000 feet. A salvo of bombs struck the water some 800 yards ahead of the cruiser, HMAS *Australia*. Apart from that near miss, no damage was done to the ships in the Task Force 17 Support Group. Ironically, HMAS *Australia* shortly after picked up a radio intercept from the American bombers reporting to their Townsville base that "considerable damage had been inflicted on a Japanese naval squadron".

the Battle of Midway. In the event, it joined the carriers USS *Enterprise* and USS *Hornet* in the defence of Midway where it was sunk.

Taking into account Japan's greater aircraft losses in the Coral Sea and America's additional land-based aircraft at Midway, Yamamoto no longer enjoyed the numerical superiority in aircraft over the Americans on which he had based his planning for the Battle of Midway.

Conclusion

The Battle of the Coral Sea also had a direct influence on the defence of Australia in 1942. With the Port Moresby invasion fleet repelled, in order to capture Port Moresby, the Japanese were forced to land on the north coast of Papua and then launch a land offensive over the Owen Stanley Range. That offensive proved very difficult to re-supply, although it was initially successful, with Japanese troops forcing the Australian Militia back across the Owen Stanley Range to Imitia Ridge, 40km from Port Moresby. But the Japanese could advance no further. At the end of a long supply line, and with Guadalcanal now the priority for Japanese re-supply, the Japanese were forced back to their landing points on Papua's north coast. By the end of 1942, the direct threat to Australia had been averted.

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