

The Battle of

By Dr. Edward M. Furgol

The Battle of Coral Sea has a claim for an eminent place in the history of Naval Aviation. The closing stages of the action witnessed the first combat between two fleets solely by carrier plane. Furthermore, the battle was the first time, following the outbreak of war on December 7, 1941, that the Japanese advance in the Pacific was halted. Finally, the clash provided the U.S. Navy, in particular its Naval Aviation, with its initial victory against the Imperial Japanese Navy.

The potential for action arose from Japanese plans in Spring 1942 to advance south and southeastward from the Bismarcks and Solomons in the South Pacific. The immediate objectives of the offensive were the capture of Tulagi in the Solomons and Port Moresby, New Guinea, with a second phase plan for the capture of the Nauru and Ocean islands. Tulagi would be developed as a seaplane base to cover the flank of the advance on Port Moresby and to support later seizures of islands astride the American-Australian supply lines, such as New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa. Port Moresby was the most important prize; its possession would secure Japanese bases on New Guinea and at Rabaul, New Britain; would provide the Japanese with the ability to neutralize north Australian airfields; and would anchor the western flank of the

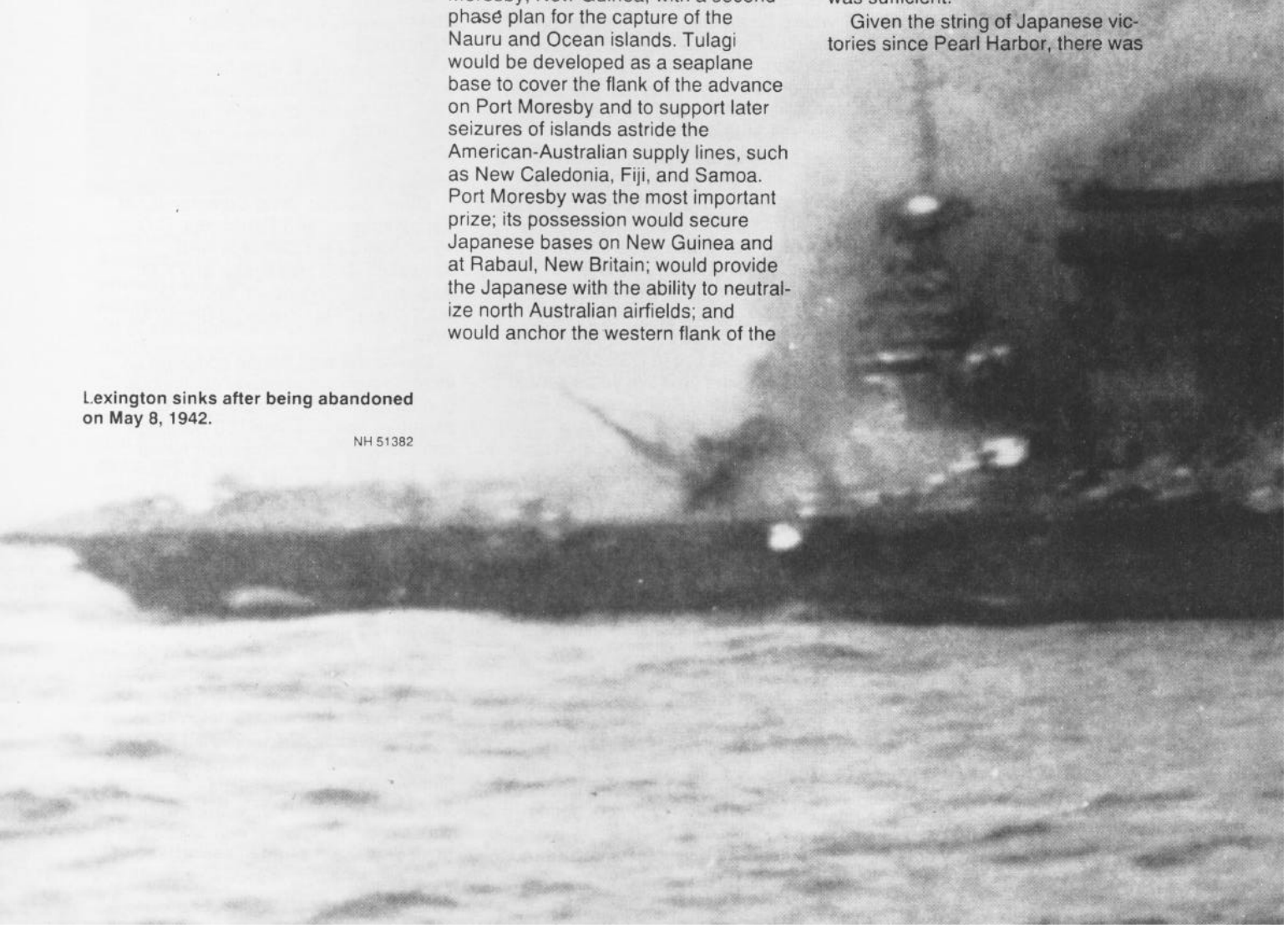
next offensive in the South Pacific. Nauru and Ocean, which contained rich phosphorous deposits essential for Japanese agriculture, were important economically.

Following standard Japanese practice, the fleet units assigned to the operation were divided into several groups. Two units – the Port Moresby and Tulagi Invasion Groups – carried the ground forces. Support and Covering Forces protected the Port Moresby Group, which consisted of a light carrier, cruisers, and destroyers. The Striking Force, the most powerful element, consisted of just two aircraft carriers. The Japanese, believing the Allies would offer little resistance and busy reequipping the remainder of Admiral Nagumo's carriers for the "decisive" attack against Midway, thought that such a small carrier group was sufficient.

Given the string of Japanese victories since Pearl Harbor, there was

Lexington sinks after being abandoned on May 8, 1942.

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Coral Sea

no reason to suspect the offensive would fail. However, far behind the battlefield, the Americans had already scored a devastating victory that provided the possibility of thwarting Japanese intentions. Several months after the war's start, Navy cryptologists, primarily at Station Hypo, Pearl Harbor, broke the Japanese naval code. By analyzing traffic patterns and decoding 10 to 15 percent of the messages received, Station Hypo gave Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet Admiral Chester W.

Nimitz an accurate picture of Japanese designs. By mid-April he knew of the enemy's plans to attack Port Moresby. Nimitz had learned that two enemy carriers were on the way to Rabaul, and he had sound information on Operation MO (Port Moresby-Tulagi) forces. Consequently, he dispatched carrier *Lexington* (CV-2) to join carrier *Yorktown* (CV-5) in the Coral Sea.

The action was divided into two distinct phases – the actions on May 1-7, and the carrier battle on the 8th. Ad-



Naval Aviation in WW II

miral Frank Jack Fletcher's task force of *Lexington*, *Yorktown*, and two cruiser divisions rendezvoused in the southeast Coral Sea. Fletcher divided his forces and steamed north with a task group centered on *Yorktown*. On the 4th, *Yorktown*'s planes attacked the Japanese convoy off Tulagi. The carrier launched three strikes with TBD *Devastators*, SBD *Dauntlesses*, and F4F *Wildcats*, which sank few enemy ships. Nimitz later commented, "The Tulagi operation was certainly disappointing in terms of ammunition expended to results obtained." The admiral stated that it emphasized "the necessity for target practice at every opportunity." As would be common throughout the war, the pilots' eagerness often had the effect of inflating their meager success into a magnificent victory. After recovering his planes, Fletcher spent the remainder of the 4th and all the next day steaming to rejoin *Lexington*.

The Japanese, after successfully taking Tulagi, failed to coordinate their movements. The Port Moresby groups, which steamed on May 4, milled about the Louisiades – off the eastern tip of New Guinea – instead of pressing south. Admiral Takagi's Striking Force moved with greater purpose. Assuming that Fletcher would move west to intercept the Port Moresby forces, Takagi maneuvered west and south to cut him off from American bases to the east.

The 7th was a day of confusion, with the Americans gaining the advantage. Once again Fletcher divided his force, sending some of his cruisers under Rear Admiral J. G. Crace to intercept the Port Moresby Invasion Group as it departed from the Jomard Passage. Within the same hour, both Fletcher and Takagi received faulty aerial reconnaissance reports. The Japanese acted first; enemy pilots launched and sped out to strike a carrier and a cruiser only to discover the fleet oiler *Neosho* (AO-23) and destroyer *Sims* (DD-409). The latter sank in minutes, but *Neosho*, although badly battered, survived for four days.

While the Japanese expended their efforts on these targets, American planes hit the Port Moresby Covering Group. Initially, they had followed the wrong course based on an error in the morning aerial reconnaissance report. Discovering light carrier *Shoho*, the SBDs and TBDs from *Lexington* and *Yorktown* sent her to the bottom within half an hour. The Covering Group now



U.S. Navy TBD *Devastators* torpedoed the Japanese light carrier *Shoho* on May 7, 1942.

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withdrew. Earlier, the Invasion Group had turned north after detecting Crace's cruisers. In late afternoon, the carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, both Pearl Harbor raid veterans, launched a strike force of 27 planes. Poor information and bad weather caused them to miss their targets. Attempting to return to their carriers, several Japanese planes tried to land on the American carriers. *Wildcats* downed eight of these, with one later ditching as a result of damage; 18 planes landed on the Japanese carriers. The Japanese forces involved in the Port Moresby operation had lost the confidence to advance until they had assurance that Fletcher's task force was destroyed.

The balance of forces now appeared deceptively even. Both sides had two carriers, with the Americans having a slight advantage in numbers of flyable aircraft. Despite superficial appearances, the Americans were in trouble. The Japanese had numerous advantages: U.S. planes were much slower than theirs; the Japanese possessed a better mix of dive-bombers, torpedo planes, and fighters in their strike groups; Japanese torpedo squadrons had a longer range and faster weapon; the enemy had more combat experience as a unit than Fletcher's men, whose high morale could not bridge the gulf; and weather conditions favored the enemy when the American ships headed south into clear skies, while the Japanese remained under the cover of clouds and showers during their advance.

The decisive actions on the 8th had all occurred by early afternoon. At dawn, both forces launched scout planes. Discovery of the opposing carriers and launching of the strike groups took place within minutes of each other. Japanese planes received better target direction. Even worse, direction of the U.S. combat air patrol



Lieutenant (jg) J. A. Leppa (pilot), right, and Radio Mate 3rd Class J. A. Liska (gunner) of VS-2 flew a Douglas SBD-3 *Dauntless* from *Lexington* during the battle. They shot down four Japanese planes during the action.

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failed miserably in its duty of protecting the carriers. The Japanese attacked, quickly scoring hits on both *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, which started fires. The former suffered more, but within an hour, damage control efforts apparently had succeeded.

Meanwhile, the American attack groups had problems. Due to bad weather and faulty intelligence, only two-thirds reached the targets. For about an hour, they attacked *Shokaku*, while *Zuikaku* remained sheltered under squalls. Perversely, that circumstance may have aided the pilots, who would have dissipated their attacks on two targets. At Coral Sea, they only had a six-percent hit rate: the 28 *Dauntless* dive-bombers scored three hits and the 22 *Devastator* torpedo planes failed to make any. After 1240, the first battle between naval for-

ces that never made visual contact ended.

Following the strikes, both forces began to separate. *Lexington*, although sustaining five bomb and torpedo hits, continued in formation and received her incoming planes. Fires on the ship forced doctors to work in an atmosphere of poisonous gases. Captain Frederick C. Sherman wrote afterwards, "I must comment on the heroism of the men. It was an inspiration. The first thought of all was for the wounded." At 1247, a major internal explosion, caused by gas vapors released by a torpedo hit ignited by a generator spark, rocked the ship. Still planes continued to land until 1414. At 1445, a second major explosion wreaked havoc on the fire and engine room ventilation system. By 1515, the fire was beyond control and the danger of bombs exploding from overheating was possible. At 1630, with the steam safety valves lifted, *Lexington* stopped dead in the water. Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch ordered Sherman to abandon ship at 1707. The captain recalled that in the evacuation "there was not the slightest panic and disorder." Two hours later, a destroyer fired four torpedoes into *Lexington*, sending her to the bottom. Witnesses commented that her former crew burst into tears as she sank. An officer on-board *Yorktown* said, "There she goes. She didn't turn over. She is going down with her head up. Dear old *Lex*. A lady to the last."

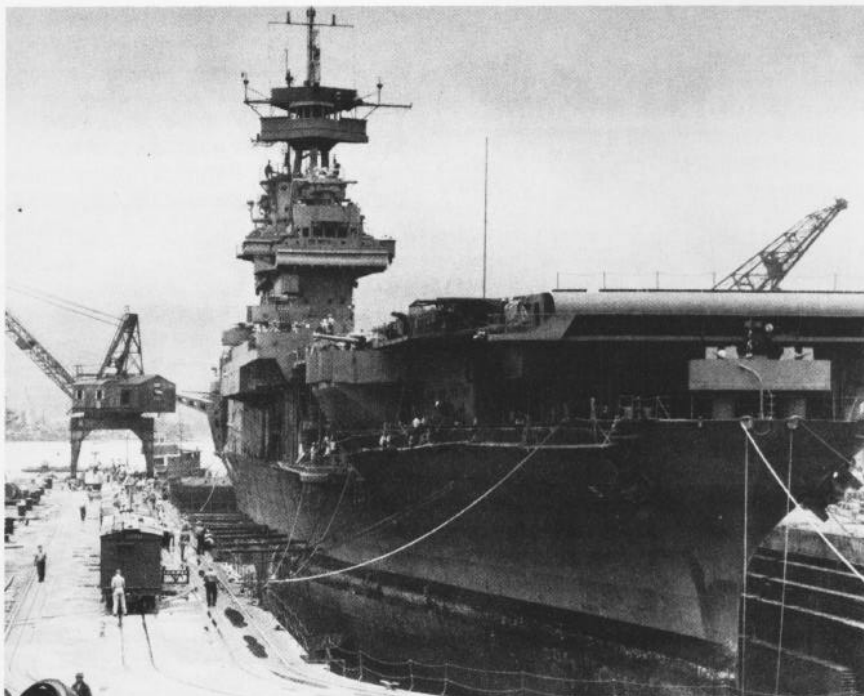
Coral Sea resulted in a Japanese tactical victory, but the U.S. Navy was the real winner. The Japanese sank a fleet carrier and a destroyer, and damaged another fleet carrier, losing only a light carrier and suffering damage to a fleet carrier. American forces withdrew from the area. With air groups too battered to support further

advance, the Japanese were brought to a standstill. Port Moresby remained in Allied control. The operation to capture the Nauru and Ocean islands, deterred by the May 15 spotting of RAdm. Halsey's two-carrier TF-16, was not resumed until three months later, too late to offer much boost to enemy spirits. *Shokaku* was so severely damaged that she could not join the Midway carrier force. *Zuikaku*, owing to losses of pilots and planes, required squadron reorganization that removed her, too, from that campaign. The damage to *Yorktown* proved to be quickly patched in time for Midway. American pilots, fighter directors, combat air patrols, and aerial reconnaissance and damage control crews realized that they needed more

schooling in the art of carrier warfare.

The Battle of Coral Sea stabilized the southwest Pacific front and reduced Japanese carriers available for Midway by a third. It proved a harbinger of things to come in both the carrier battles of the Pacific and the resurgence of the Navy. ■

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Yorktown undergoes rapid patching in the dry dock at Pearl Harbor after the battle.

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SBD scout planes from Yorktown sank the Japanese destroyer Kikuzuki at Tulagi in one of the few successes on May 4, 1942.

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