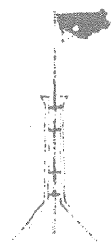
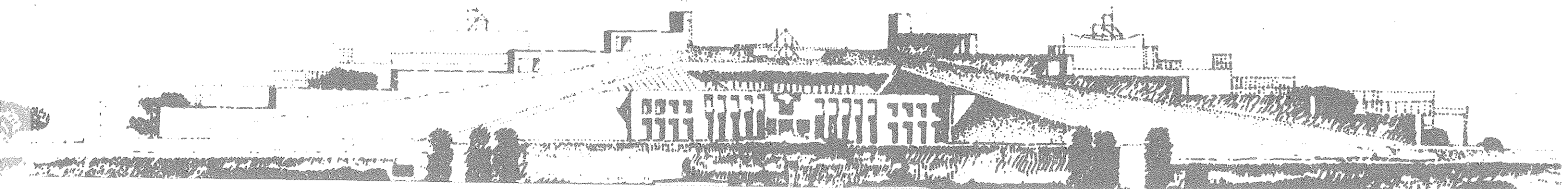


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INVASION 1942?
AUSTRALIA AND THE JAPANESE THREAT



Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia



ISSN 1037-2938

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Published by the Department of the Parliamentary Library, 1992

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**Parliamentary
Research Service**

Background Paper Number 6 1992

***Invasion 1942?
Australia and the Japanese Threat***

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29 April 1992

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INVASION 1942? AUSTRALIA AND THE JAPANESE THREAT¹

INTRODUCTION

It has long been popular wisdom in Australia that Japan intended, and actually attempted, an invasion of the continent in the dark days of early 1942. The traditional view would argue that, first, the Battle of the Coral Sea in early May 1942 saved Australia from imminent invasion, and second, the campaign in New Guinea's Owen Stanley Ranges in September-October 1942 repelled a Japanese force aiming at using Port Moresby as a stepping off platform to the Australian continent. After presenting some statements representative of that view, this paper will examine Japanese policy concerning an invasion of Australia, and briefly discuss the military significance in this context of the battles of the Coral Sea, Midway and the Kokoda Trail.

THE FEAR OF INVASION

During 1942

Even before the attack on Pearl Harbour opened the Pacific war, Australian public opinion, conscious of the country's isolation in the face of British involvement in the European conflict, saw a Japanese attack on Australia as likely. For example, in October 1941 the rural *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW) published a feature article "Australia ready to meet Japanese attack".² And as Japanese forces swept through south-east Asia and the Philippines, ever closer to Australia, these fears of invasion began to grow. On 2 January 1942 the *Sydney Morning Herald* warned in its editorial:

It is not too soon for the Australian Government to plan and prepare this people for a 'scorched earth' policy, guerilla fighting, and all else that 'total war' entails.³

With the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, and the bombing of Darwin on 19 February, this merely pessimistic attitude towards the war began to tend towards the hysterical. Australia's security hopes and plans had for years been pinned on the British presence at Singapore; now this last remnant of British power in the region had been swept away, and with it Australia's 8th Division went into Japanese captivity. On 17 February the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, with headlines of 'NO SURRENDER' CALL TO AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE and INVASION THREAT, a statement from Prime Minister Curtin that "the protection of this country is no

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1. Much of this paper relies on material taken from these sources: Brown, G. *The Kokoda Trail - Myth and Reality*, unpublished History Honours Thesis, University of Newcastle, 1971; Brown, G. "Attitudes to an invasion of Australia in 1942", *RUSI Journal* (UK), March 1977; and Frei, H.P. *Japan's Southward Advance and Australia*, Melbourne University Press, 1991.
 2. *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 9 October 1941.
 3. *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) editorial, 2 January 1942.

longer a question of contributing to a world at war, but of an enemy threatening to invade our own shore."⁴

Similar concerns were expressed in Parliament. In March 1942, Curtin stated that "we must first ensure that Australia shall be held",⁵ and a month later, the Minister for the Navy and Munitions (Mr. Makin) explained that measures were being taken to immobilise all small private boats on the Australian coast because the Japanese had successfully used such craft for infiltrating the defences during "earlier invasions", such as that of Malaya.⁶ On the same day, the Prime Minister rose and made his Government's assessment of the situation perfectly clear:

Common sense dictates that we face the fact that Japan will do everything in an attempt to render Australia impotent as a base for an Allied offensive. The Government regards an outright Japanese attack on Australia as a constant and undiminished danger.⁷

This stand did not lack for support from the Government backbenches. Mr J. Rosevear (ALP, NSW) typified his Party when he said in the House:

We must bear in mind that Australia is so seriously menaced today by the Japanese that we cannot afford to send our soldiers overseas. All the talk of the Opposition about conducting an offensive immediately must be regarded as sheer humbug while Australia is menaced in the north by greatly superior forces of Japanese...We must...prevent the Japanese from landing in Australia.⁸

In fact, some members of the Opposition were of like mind. Mr. John (later Sir John) McEwen (CP, Vic) was explicit about the threat to Australia's territorial integrity when he said:

We have men of the Australian Military Forces stationed on the mainland of New Guinea, where they are subject daily to enemy attacks. On that mainland there are Japanese forces which, we believe, are concentrating preparatory to an attack on this country.⁹

McEwen's statement is symptomatic of a trend then occurring in the development of Australian opinion - the rise of the belief that, when the inevitable Japanese

4. *SMH*, 17 February 1942: p. 5.

5. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, Vol. 170, p. 366; 25 March 1942.

6. *Ibid*, p. 590ff; 29 April 1942.

7. *Ibid*, p. 600; 29 April 1942.

8. *Ibid*, p. 806; 1 May 1942.

9. *Ibid*, p. 815; 1 May 1942.

invasion came, it would come through the agency of the Japanese forces then marshalling in New Guinea.

Nevertheless, fear reached a new peak in May 1942, with the battle of the Coral Sea. When news of the developing clash was released, Curtin told Australians that "the invasion menace is capable hourly of becoming an actuality" and that "Australia cannot escape the blow".¹⁰ Then, when it became clear that the Japanese force was retiring towards Rabaul, the national media proclaimed the defeat of an invasion attempt - the *Age*, for instance, announcing *JAPANESE INVASION FLEET REPULSED*¹¹ - and the whole country rejoiced at its reprieve. It is significant that, of all the battles in the Pacific theatre involving or concerning Australia, only that of the Coral Sea is still annually commemorated on a large scale, through "Coral Sea Week".

The land battle in Papua, along the Kokoda Trail which crossed the forbidding Owen Stanley ranges, was also held to be a preliminary move for another invasion attempt: this time one requiring Port Moresby as an advanced base.¹² Speaking of the Japanese landings and subsequent operations in New Guinea, World War I leader Billy Hughes (at this time an Opposition MP) said:

...they [the Japanese] are creeping nearer and nearer. Soon, they may have established enough bases to make a major attack on Australia itself.¹³

Postwar Invasion Beliefs

Postwar accounts add further weight to the invasion theories born in 1942. In a farewell message to the Australians who had served under him, no less an authority than General Douglas MacArthur said on 21 August 1945 that they had been involved in:

...a struggle which saw our cause at its lowest ebb as the enemy hordes plunged forward with almost irresistible force to the very threshold of your homeland. There you took your stand, and with your Allies turned the enemy advance on the Owen Stanleys and at Milne Bay [an abortive Japanese landing at the tip of Papua on 25 August 1942], in the fall of 1942, thus denying him access to Australia and otherwise shifting the tide of battle in our favour...¹⁴

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10. *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 9 May 1942: p. 1.
 11. *Age*, 11 May 1942: p. 1.
 12. In August 1942 the Japanese landed a force at Milne Bay, at the eastern tip of New Guinea, but were speedily defeated by Australian forces. This operation also was seen as part of the Japanese "invasion" preliminaries.
 13. Quoted in Paull, R. *Retreat from Kokoda*, London 1958: p. 50.
 14. *The Reports of General MacArthur*, Vol. 1, The Campaigns of MacArthur in the Pacific: Washington, 1966: p. 392.

Evidence that this belief has sunk deep into Australian military folklore is also available from more recent sources. For example, the ABC's 7:00pm television news, a service with a high reputation for accuracy and objectivity, informed viewers during the 1988 Coral Sea Week that

In 1942, the Japanese attempted to take the north Queensland coastline. To stop them, the United States stepped in to help the Australians turn them back.¹⁵

And very recently the Prime Minister (Mr Keating) expressed the view that

It was only in World War II that this country came under threat of invasion - this was not true in World War I. And the invasion force was being assembled and was thwarted really only at the Coral Sea. And it was attempted from the north coast of New Guinea through to Port Moresby, where we thwarted that advance. That was an exclusively Australian thing and it was there that Australia was saved, in turning that back.¹⁶

Notwithstanding this enduring belief, historical research over the last fifty years (especially, of course, into Japanese sources) has given a rather different picture of the situation. This paper now examines Japanese strategy and strategic decisions during the early days of the Pacific War.

JAPAN'S STRATEGIC QUANDARY IN 1942

Early 1942 saw Japan confronted with a number of profoundly important strategic decisions.¹⁷ While events had moved with alarming rapidity for the Allies, in a sense the Japanese thrust had been too successful, and the Japanese themselves were now uncertain about their next step. Quite apart from the question of how best to cooperate with its new military ally Germany, a strategy had to be found for South East Asia and the Pacific. There the issue was whether to strike west at the British in India, south at Australia or east towards Midway, Hawaii and Polynesia. The main Japanese concern was to consolidate its extensive new acquisitions in South East Asia. A proposal to invade Australia was thus based not on a desire for more resources - South East Asia already offered all that Japan needed - but on strategic considerations. From the Japanese point of view, Australia was a strategic liability, with its northern settlements playing host to the forces of the enemy.¹⁸ Broome offered safety to the Dutch escaping them in the East Indies, Darwin was

15. ABC TV 7:00pm news (Canberra broadcast), 8 May 1988.

16. "Regional role demands mental revolution" (record of interview with the Prime Minister), *The Australian*, 21 April 1992: p. 4.

17. Turner, L.C.F. The crisis of Japanese strategy January - June 1942. *Australian Army Journal*, June 1973: p. 8-24.

18. Frei, H.P. *Japan's southward advance and Australia*, Melbourne University Press, 1991: p.161.

a base for American fighters on the counter-attack, and there was the ominous prospect of Australia emerging as a retaliatory base for a revived US military machine.

A significant difference of approach to future strategy arose between the Army and Navy sectors in Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ), the Japanese military's central directing and coordinating organ.

The Japanese Navy: Invasion Supported

The attitude of the Japanese Navy, one of the most formidable in the world, was to keep the enemy continuously on their toes; to be on the offensive always and put pressure on the war front from Hawaii to Ceylon and Australia; and to seek swift and decisive victories, coupled with territorial gains, which hopefully would quickly bring the enemy to the negotiating table.¹⁹ Final victory for Japan lay in attacking and defeating the allies before they could mobilise their full strength and bring it to bear against Japan.

The chief of the Navy General Staff's Planning Section, and a major supporter of the Australian invasion idea, Captain Tomioka Sadatoshi, deeply feared Australia becoming a strategic springboard for a US counter-offensive. After the war he wrote:

'War operations' first stage had gone entirely according to schedule...As we were moving to stage two, what I worried about most, was Australia.²⁰

Australia had either to be knocked out quickly or cut off from America. To prevent Australia being used as a base for an American counter-offensive, the Navy General Staff, as early as December 1941, pressed for an invasion of the strategically most important points on the northern and northeastern coasts of Australia. Japan would there annihilate the enemy's maritime forces, cut the American-Australian line of communication, and thereby deal the entire Australian nation a thorough blow. The Navy General Staff maintained that this could be done with very little expenditure of men and war materiel.²¹

The Japanese Army: Invasion Opposed

The Army perceived the realities of the Pacific War quite differently. "The Army General Staff opposes navy insistence to invade Australia because it overextends the Pacific periphery", noted Major-General Tanaka Shin'ichi, Operations Section chief

19. *Ibid*, p. 162.

20. Quoted at *loc.cit*, p. 162.

21. *Ibid*, p. 163.

(and Tomioka's opposite) in the Army General Staff, in February 1942.²² The Army was, by European standards, quite small; its 51 divisions represented only a quarter of the force Hitler could command and, unit for unit, the Japanese were less well equipped.

In September 1941 the Army's 51 divisions were distributed as follows: 28 were in China, 13 in the puppet state of Manchukuo and 10 (including 5 not fully trained) in the home islands. War with China, then in its fifth year, was far from won, and the Soviet Union, at war with Japan's ally Germany, loomed as a constant potential threat. From the total force available, 11 divisions - five from China and six from Japan - were assembled for the strike south after Pearl Harbour. Skilful planning at all levels, an ill-prepared opposition, plus a little luck, allowed this comparatively small force to wreak enormous havoc in South East Asia, thereby touching off the Australian invasion fears discussed above.²³

The Army Section of IGHQ rejected the proposed invasion of Australia as a reckless undertaking far in excess of Japan's capabilities. Lacking the resources for further adventures southward because of its limited size and heavy commitments, the Army argued for a defensive strategy based upon holding and exploiting areas already won, and making their recapture by the Allies too costly.

At the centre of discussions was the size of the force needed to invade Australia. The Navy General Staff calculated in its request in December 1941 that three divisions (between 45,000 and 60,000 men) would suffice to secure the flanks and centre of the northeastern and northwestern Australian coastlines for Japan. Frei regards this figure as 'quite realistic':

Had Japan actually launched a limited offensive in January/February with three divisions, there is little doubt that northern Australia would have suffered the same fate as Rabaul and Ambon, where the Japanese employed a division against a battalion. Darwin was then garrisoned with a mere brigade or two of mainly militiamen, joined by 3,000 Americans at the end of February.²⁴

Frei argues that Australia's elite troops were in Africa, and that the seven CMF (militia) divisions, consisting largely of hastily called-up reservists, were assigned mainly for the defence of vital points in the southeast corner of the continent. Even if Frei's assessment is correct, one wonders how long Japan could have held any key points she may have seized on the north coast of Australia if the Navy had had its way.

22. *Ibid*, p. 162.

23. Brown, G.M. Attitudes to an invasion of Australia in 1942. *RUSI Journal* (UK), March 1977, p. 29.

24. Frei, H.P. *op.cit.* p. 164.

Certainly, the Japanese Army always opposed as too low the Navy's estimated number of soldiers needed for an invasion. The Army continually insisted that it would take at least ten divisions (between 150,000 and 200,000 men) and possibly twelve to invade Australia successfully, and it was not prepared to find the required divisions by weakening its elite troops on the Soviet border in Manchuria. Nor had the Army forgotten the substantial defeat it suffered on this frontier (at a place called Khalkin Gol) in early 1939 at the hands of Soviet troops under the then unknown General Georgi Zhukov.

In addition, the Army General Staff calculated that 1.5 to 2 million tons of shipping was required to support a major assault on Australia, but to provide that amount of tonnage would, by cutting normal merchant traffic, destroy the basis of the nation's war economy.²⁵ Moreover, the size of the armada which would have to be assembled if the Army's estimates were right meant that the entire Japanese Combined Fleet would be required to provide cover in the event of interception.

The Army's Alternative Strategy

The alternative plan favoured by the Army was to isolate Australia by cutting her lines of communication with the US. This option involved the occupation of Fiji, the Samoan islands and New Caledonia. Because the operation required relatively few troops and did not handicap the Army's mainland positions against China and the Soviet Union, it could be made to fit in with the Army's concept of preserving the Pacific periphery.²⁶ A Liaison Conference on 28 February 1942 ratified the top secret document *Consequences of Cutting the Communication Lines Between the United States and Australia, and Britain, India, and Australia*, which concluded that total isolation of Australia was the key to Japan's mastery of the Southwest Pacific.²⁷

TOP LEVEL JAPANESE ATTITUDES AND DECISIONS

The attitude of Japan's wartime Prime Minister, Hideki Tojo, himself an Army general, must also be remembered. Frei points out that Tojo, despite his intimidating rhetoric calling on Australia to surrender, always opposed an invasion.²⁸ And Chris Coulthard-Clark quotes Tojo, shortly before his death, as denying that an invasion of Australia had ever been planned:

25. *Ibid*, p. 165.

26. *Ibid*, p. 167.

27. *Ibid*, p. 171.

28. *Ibid*, p. 172.

We never had enough troops to do so...We expected to occupy all New Guinea, to maintain Rabaul as a holding base, and to raid northern Australia by air. But actual physical invasion - no, at no time.²⁹

The Strategic Debate and Decision: January-March 1942

From the beginning of 1942, and especially during February and early March, the Army-Navy dispute about invading Australia became increasingly heated. An Imperial Liaison Conference - a top-level decisionmaking forum - on 7 March was unable to resolve the issue, taking refuge in vague and ambiguous formulas.³⁰ But between 7 and 13 March, the matter was finally settled and the outcome reported to the Emperor on 13 March. The Australian dispute was put on the back-burner for good. The option of invading Australia was not formally dropped in this document (*Fundamental Outline of Recommendations for Future War Leadership*), but was relegated to the end of paragraph three "as a future option to demonstrate positive warfare" - providing the situation with China and the Soviet Union allowed which, as Frei points out, in effect meant little more than 'never'.³¹

An account by a senior Army staff officer conveys both the Army's frustration with Navy expansionism and the former's refusal to countenance the Australian operation:

The Navy insisted on the capture of the Bismarck Archipelago... because it contained a strategic area - Rabaul. Since it was very important from the Navy's standpoint, we decided to take the Bismarcks. Next, the Navy insisted that we capture Port Moresby.... Actually, the Army did not want to go into these areas because of the great distances and the problem of supplies. But the Navy asserted that they were

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29. Coulthard-Clark, C. *Action stations Coral Sea*, North Sydney Allen & Unwin, 1991: p. xvi.
30. This meeting concluded that "positive measures shall be taken by seizing opportunities to expand our acquired war gains" (which might be thought to support offensive operations generally, if not specifically against Australia) but also held that Japan should be "building a political and military structure capable of withstanding a protracted war" (which might be thought to imply caution about new conquests). Brown, *The Kokoda Trail - Myth and Reality*, p.57, quoting Hattori Takushiro, *Complete History of the Greater East Asia War*, Tokyo 1953 (English microfilm copy in Australian War Memorial Library), Part III, p.117.
31. Frei, H.P. *op.cit.* p. 171. The *Sun-Herald* newspaper (21 July 1991) claimed to have uncovered a plan allegedly drawn up in May 1942 for a two-pronged Japanese attack on Australia, with diversionary actions at Darwin and the main landing at Fremantle, near Perth. On closer scrutiny, this claim is based on a Nationalist Chinese intelligence report which the Australian legation in Chungking (then the Nationalist capital) considered to contain a small core of reliable facts and a lot of surmise, though - as is often a problem in intelligence work - it was unable to distinguish between them. In any event, the Japanese document is actually a discussion of options, with an attack on India also evaluated but neither actually approved. Furthermore, the alleged intention to assault Perth, with a diversion at Darwin, suggests that the unspecified authors of the plan had little understanding of the distances or dangers inherent in such a major undertaking. It is noteworthy that neither India nor Australia were invaded by Japan in 1942.

necessary...so we took the Bismarcks. The Army also agreed to take Port Moresby, but the campaign was unsuccessful. There was also this problem: the Navy wanted to take Port Darwin in northern Australia... because the American Navy would use it as a base from which to take Moresby and the Bismarcks. The Army...claimed that military operations against Australia would be difficult from the point of view of supplies. *I absolutely refused to agree to the operation.*³²

As noted, the Army reluctantly went along with the Navy's insistence, ostensibly on strategic grounds, that Port Moresby be captured.

By late April the Army had agreed to the compromise plan which envisaged the occupation of strategic points in New Caledonia, the Fijian and Samoan Islands, to be carried out following the invasion of Tulagi in the Solomons and of Port Moresby. Through these conquests the Navy planned to establish air and submarine bases which would enable it to command both air and shipping routes from the US to eastern Australia. Special emphasis was to be placed upon stopping the ferrying of American aircraft to Australia via the South Pacific, and the destruction of tankers transporting fuel supplies.³³

However immediately after this decision, another element was added to the plan. The Commanding Officer of the Combined Fleet had for some months favoured an invasion of the central Pacific Midway Island and a diversion in the Aleutians, mainly as part of a strategy to complete the destruction of the US fleet which it had begun at Pearl Harbour. Following the bombing raid on Tokyo carried out on 18 April by 16 B-25s led by Lt.Col. Doolittle, Admiral Yamamoto, Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet, insisted that Midway be occupied to minimise future such raids. On 5 May IGHQ adopted the Midway invasion, the Army agreeing to cooperate largely because only one Army regiment was requested.³⁴ This was to prove a crucial decision, the battle of Midway becoming a turning point in the Pacific War.

Thus by early May the stage was set. Proposals to invade Australia, only ever supported by the Japanese Navy, had been in effect rejected at the highest level in Tokyo by mid-March. The alternative plan, to isolate Australia, and thus prevent its use for counter-attack, by cutting its links with the US, was to be implemented first by the immediate capture of Port Moresby, and secondly by the invasion in July of Fiji, New Caledonia and the Samoan group. In between, early in June, would be

32. Evidence of Lt-Gen S. Tanaka (Chief, First Bureau, Operations, IGHQ Army Section, quoted in *The Reports of General MacArthur*, Volume II Part I "Japanese Operations in the South West Pacific Area", US Government Printer, Washington 1966, p.132, n.33. (Emphasis added).

33. *The Reports of General MacArthur*, Vol. II, Part 1. Japanese Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area. Washington 1966, p. 133.

34. *Ibid*, p. 134.

an attack on Midway aimed both at annihilating the US fleet and preventing Doolittle-type raids on Japan.

THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA (May 7-9, 1942)

Thus, when a Japanese fleet including several troop-carriers was sighted in the Coral Sea on 6 May 1942, its objective was not any point on the Australian coast, but - as the Army had so reluctantly agreed under Navy pressure - Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea.

An account of the Battle of the Coral Sea, which took place from May 7 to 9, is given in an Annex to this paper, and little will be said here. Serious mistakes were made on both sides in this battle, the first carrier duel in history, ie. with the constituent naval units out of sight of each other. The *Macarthur Reports* state that the conflict "had not resulted in a decisive naval victory for either side",³⁵ but it is probably more correct to see it as a tactical victory for the Japanese - they sank more significant American ships than the Americans did Japanese - but as a strategic victory for the US, because the Japanese invasion convoy, lacking adequate air cover, was ordered to return to Rabaul. The attack on Port Moresby was postponed until early July, and when attempted was by way of overland assault (the Kokoda Trail) and not by amphibious landing.

THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY (June 5-7, 1942)

The significant aspect of the Midway battle is that, with the loss of four of its original ten carriers (against the sinking of one US carrier, the *Yorktown*), the Japanese Navy suffered a major defeat, and its strategic offensive capacity was severely weakened. With the balance of power in the Pacific thus abruptly altered, the Japanese were placed on the strategic defensive for the first time in the Pacific War.

The Midway disaster forced Japan to take decisions which ultimately killed the plan to isolate Australia. On June 11, IGHQ ordered a two months "postponement" of the Fiji-Samoa-New Caledonia operation, previously scheduled for early July.³⁶ At the same time, with a direct amphibious assault on Port Moresby no longer practical, attention turned to a possible land drive from the east coast of Papua across the Owen Stanley ranges. An initial landing of some 3,600 Japanese troops took place at Buna on 21 July 1942. From here, the Japanese prepared to advance across the Owen Stanley ranges to capture Port Moresby by direct attack.

35. *Ibid*, p. 138.

36. The Fijian, New Caledonian and Samoan operations never took place. IGHQ cancelled them by order issued on 11 July 1942. *Ibid*, p.138.

THE BATTLE OF THE KOKODA TRAIL (July 1942-January 1943)

A number of mistakes were made by the Japanese military in connection with this operation:

- They overestimated the strategic importance of Port Moresby as a key defensive position. Although it would have been useful in protecting Japanese troops within New Guinea, it was too far south to provide adequate protection to their major bases such as Rabaul.
- The Army (albeit reluctantly) committed itself to the type of operation which it had long feared and resisted; a time-consuming thrust over especially difficult territory in a remote area with inadequate forces and uncertain supply lines. Papuan fighting was eventually to cost the Army 15,000 troops.
- Preparation for the operation was inadequate, with intelligence often at fault. For example, the first Japanese detachment landed at Buna had orders to prepare for capture of "the Buna-Kokoda road area extending to Port Moresby" - in fact, at the time there was not twenty miles of sealed public road in all Papua New Guinea outside Port Moresby.³⁷

The Japanese position was further weakened by the US invasion of Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942. Although at first the Japanese underestimated the threat posed by this attack, eventually it was forced to withdraw troops from Papua to reinforce its forces in the Solomons. Throughout the Papua campaign, Guadalcanal was a running sore which consumed the strength Japan had intended for use against Port Moresby. One might speculate that, had it not been for Guadalcanal, the Japanese advance might have reached its goal.³⁸

In fact, it seems clear that had IGHQ been willing to write-off either the Moresby operation along the Kokoda Trail, or (alternatively) to write-off Guadalcanal, and commit all available forces to the other, then either Guadalcanal or the Kokoda Trail may well have been a Japanese victory. By using forces sufficient for one campaign to fight two, Japan lost both.

The victories at Milne Bay and in the Owen Stanleys were certainly valuable in lifting Allied, and especially Australian, morale. For the first time on land Allied forces, mainly Australian soldiers, fighting in extremely harsh terrain, had defeated their formidable foe, gaining a measure of self-respect and vengeance for Singapore.

37. Brown, G.M. *The Kokoda Trail - Myth and Reality*. Unpublished History Honours Thesis, University of Newcastle, 1971: p. 62.

38. *Ibid*, p. 64.

But the Japanese defeat, although damaging to Army morale, was not of great strategic significance. Placed in perspective, the fighting on the Kokoda Trail resulted in the repulse by the Allies of a small Japanese force sent to occupy a base on the south coast of Papua. To claim it, as MacArthur did, and many Australians do, as a "decisive battle which saved Australia" is to considerably overrate its significance in the general scheme of the Pacific War.³⁹

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

- With the Japanese Army firmly and realistically opposed to an Australian invasion, there was never any real threat of an invasion of Australia in 1942.
- Australian popular fears of an invasion were understandable in the circumstances. The world had seen, first, Hitler's forces sweeping through Europe, and secondly, Japan's lightning thrust into South East Asia. Australia was next in line and the Japanese forces seemed unstoppable. The Government, which was better informed, showed a public tendency to overstate the danger.
- If the Japanese had taken Port Moresby, either in May or later in 1942, it seems certain that some far north Queensland towns would have been exposed to bombing attacks for as long as Japan maintained a base in southern New Guinea. Towns as far south as Ingham and Townsville, more than 1,000km from Port Moresby, could have received nuisance bombing if long-range Japanese flying boats were stationed at Moresby.
- Even for the most powerful forces, there is a point beyond which effective operations cannot be safely undertaken. The Japanese Army was well aware of the danger of overextended supply lines; the Japanese Navy, which had known only operational success from Pearl Harbor to the Coral Sea, maintained its unrealistic - and ultimately ruinous - philosophy of continuous offensive until this foundered at Midway.
- Australia's size and insular situation, which makes its coastline seem alarmingly difficult to defend, also supplies it with a natural moat which gives it formidable protection against invasion.

Finally, it is appropriate to note that the absence of a real Japanese invasion scenario discounts neither the bravery, skill nor sacrifice of Australian (or other) troops involved in the New Guinea theatre, where the Japanese Army suffered its first setback, or in the Coral Sea. In the overall scheme of things, the battle of the Coral Sea was important more for its place as the first between carrier task forces than because it saved Port Moresby from Japanese attack. Likewise, the Kokoda Trail campaign showed that Australians could defeat Japanese ground troops in

39. *Ibid*, p. 67.

jungle warfare; the fact that the Japanese attacks were aimed at Port Moresby, not Australia, does not detract from the enduring significance of these battles as part of the nation's military tradition.

APPENDIX: BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

NOTE: Because the map included with the attached article did not reproduce clearly, we have replaced it with a map of the battle taken from The Reports of General MacArthur, Volume II Part I "Japanese Operations in the South West Pacific Area", p.137.

BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

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In early 1942 as the list of military defeats and reversals for the Australian, British, American and Dutch military and naval forces began to mount the feeling in the general populace of Australia was one of depression and a general expectation that the Japanese would invade at any moment.

Almost as if aware of these fears the Japanese were, by April 1942, examining the possibility of capturing Port Moresby, Tulagi, New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa. The object of this plan was to extend and strengthen the Japanese defensive perimeter as well as cutting the lines of communication between Australia and the United States. The occupation of Port Moresby, designated Operation MO, would not only cut off the eastern sea approaches to Darwin but provide the Imperial Japanese Navy with a secure operating base on Australia's northern doorstep.

At the same time that the Naval Staff were examining options for further operations the planning staff of the Combined Fleet were doing the same. Though their objectives were different. In Early April 1942 the staff of the Combined Fleet had presented the Naval Staff with a proposal for the invasion and capture of Midway Island. By this action it was hoped that the American Fleet would be enticed "into an ambush where they [the American Fleet] could be annihilated by overwhelming numbers"! In essence Admiral Yamamoto was

hoping to repeat Admiral Togo Heihachiro's victory over the Russians at the Straits of Tsushima in 1905. After much haggling the two staffs agreed to go ahead with the Midway operation after the capture of Port Moresby. However, planning progressed slowly until the 18 April when American B25 bombers led by Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle attacked targets in the Japanese Home Islands.

The military value of this raid was minimal, "but its psychological effect on the Japanese was all that might have been desired. The army and navy had failed in their duty to safeguard the homeland and the Emperor from attack. Admiral Yamamoto

regarded the raid as a mortifying personal defeat." As a result of this first air raid on Japan the Midway operation took on greater importance and Admiral Inouye, at Rabaul, was instructed that the Port Moresby operation was to take place in early May with the Midway operation planned for the following month. "The generals and admirals had suffered a tremendous loss of face, and their angry over-reaction eventually brought a succession of strategic disasters".³

Had the Doolittle raid not occurred there is the real possibility that the majority of the

Deboyne off the east coast of New Guinea. The intent was to use both islands as bases for flying boats which would then conduct patrols into the Coral Sea in order to protect the flank of the Moresby invasion force. The Japanese also believed that they would be denying the Americans the use of these islands for the same purpose. The Moresby occupation force would sail after the capture of Tulagi on 3 May. As the Moresby occupation force entered the Coral Sea from the north it would be covered by the Carrier Striking Force which had entered the Coral Sea from the direction of the Solomon

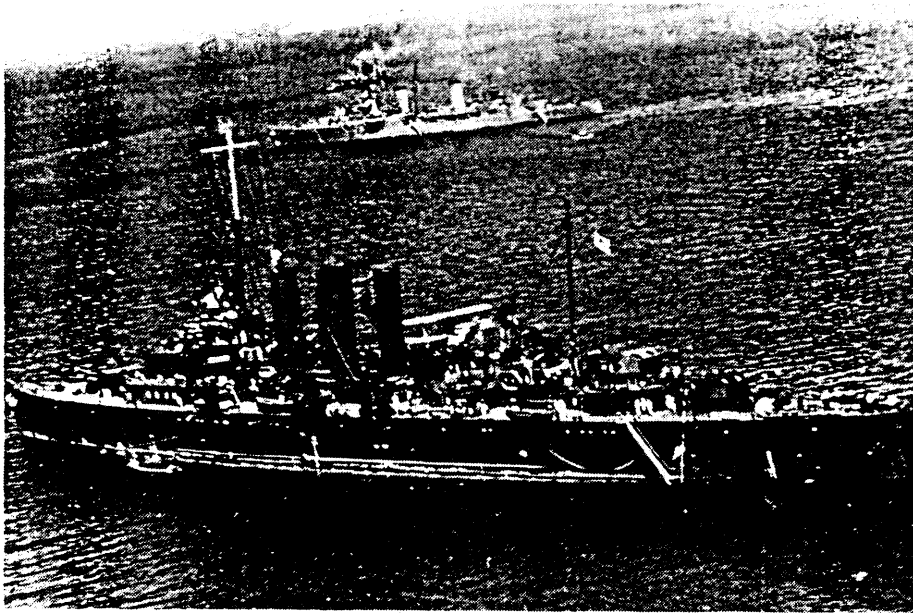
Islands. Prior to implementation, the operation was expanded to include the seizure of Ocean Island and Nauru after the capture of Port Moresby.

Admiral Inouye, Commander of the Fourth Fleet, based at Rabaul had overall command of Operation MO. His forces were divided into several major groups:

- **Tulagi Invasion Group.** Commanded by Rear Admiral Kiyohide Shima, consisting of minelayers OKINOSHIMA and KOIE MARU, two destroyers

KIKUZUKI and YUZUKI, the transport AZUMASAN MARU, submarine chasers TOSHI MARU No 3 and TAMA MARU No 8 and the mine-sweepers No. 1, No 2, HAGOROMO MARU, NOSHIRO MARU No 2 and TAMA MARU. This force was to capture the island of Tulagi.

Support Group. Commanded by Rear Admiral Kuninori Marumo, consisting of the light cruisers TENRYU and TATSUTA, a seaplane transport KAMIKAWA MARU and the gunboats KEIJO MATU, SEIKAI MARU and NIKKAI MARU. This group was to establish a seaplane base in the Louisiade Archipelago.



HMA Ships AUSTRALIA and HOBART after the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Japanese aircraft carriers may have been involved in Operation MO, the aircraft carrier KAGA (72 combat planes) was originally allocated to take part in the operation but with the advancement of the timetable she had to be omitted as she was in dockyard hands till late April 1942. As it was Admiral Inouye still had the aircraft carriers SHOHO, SHOKAKU and ZUIKAKU. After completion of Operation MO the latter two carriers were to rejoin the rest of the fleet and take part in the planned operations against Midway Island.

The Japanese Plan

The Japanese plan was to seize the islands of Tulagi in the Solomons and

• **Carrier Striking Force.** Commanded by Vice Admiral Takeo Takagi, consisting of the aircraft carriers ZUIKAKU and SHOKAKU, heavy cruisers MYOKO and HAGURO, the destroyers ARIAKE, YUGURE, SHIRATSUYU, SHIGURE, USHIO and AKEBONO, and the oiler TOHO MARU. This group was intended to provide long range cover for the

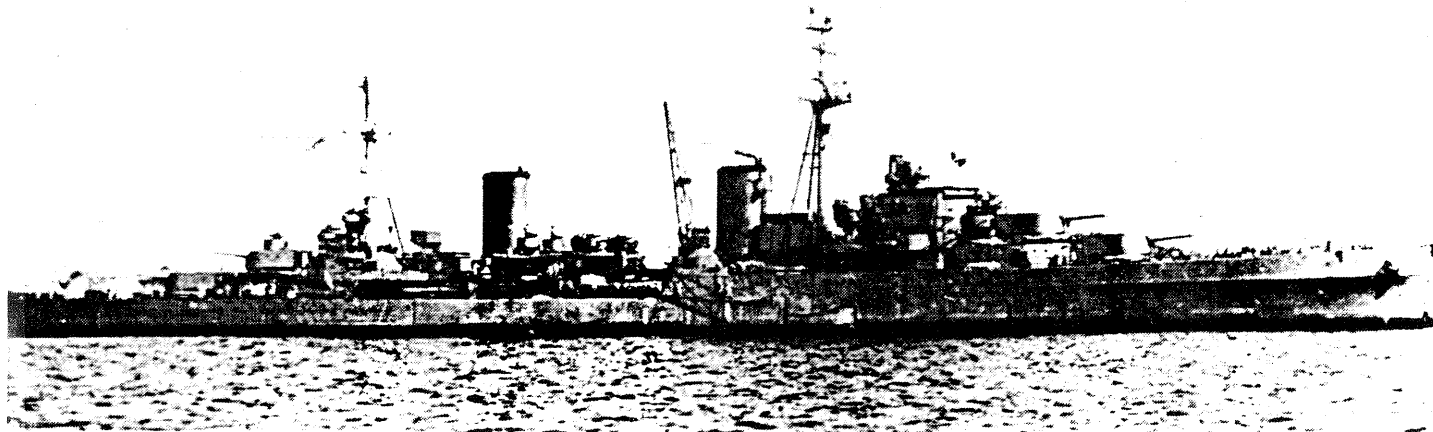
commander 25th Air Flotilla, operating out of Japanese airfields in New Guinea and Truk as well as the newly established seaplane bases were also allocated to support the operation.

American Intelligence On Japanese Intentions

Prior to the fall of the Philippines the

arrival at – further orders will be issued, but if no further orders are received they are to proceed to “RBX” (Tulagi). If air search is required in the southern sectors, the 5th Carrier Division is to send aircraft to “RBX” (Tulagi) at dawn.”

Armed with this information the Allies were able to concentrate much of their



HMAS HOBART

operation by intercepting and destroying Allied warships.

• **Attack Force.** Commanded by Rear Admiral Sadamichi Kajioka, consisting of the light cruiser YUBARI and the destroyers OITE, ASANAGI, UZUKI, MUSUKI, MOCHIZUKI and YAYOI. This group was to support the Transport Group and command the assault phase of the operation at Port Moresby.

• **Transport Group.** Commanded by Rear Admiral Katsuo Abe, consisting of 5 Navy and 6 Army transports, the repair ship OSHIMA, the oilers GOYO MARU, HOYO MARU and IRO (at anchor at Shortland Is). These ships were escorted by the minelayer TSUGARU, Fleet Mine-sweeper No 20 and mine-sweepers HAGOROMO MARU, NOSHIRO MARU No 2 and FUMI MARU No 2. The Moresby invasion troops were in this group.

• **Main Body Support Force.** Commanded by Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto, consisting of the light carrier SHOHO, heavy cruisers AOBA, KAKO, KINUGASA and FURUTAKA, and the destroyer SAZANAMI. This force was to provide protection for the Attack Force and Transport Group.

• **Submarine Force.** Commanded by Captain Noboru Ishizaki and consisting of the submarines I21, I22, I24, I28, I29, RO 33 and RO 34. This group was to provide warning of the movement of Allied warships in the Southern Coral Sea.

Land based aircraft, under the command of Rear Admiral Sadayoshi Yamada

USN's signals intelligence unit at Corregidor had been transferred to Melbourne and became a joint USN/RAN unit known as Fleet Radio Unit Melbourne (FRUMEL). This organisation was to play “an important part in the Battle of Coral Sea and in the Battle of Midway”

On 28 March U.S. Naval Intelligence decoded a message that stated “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”⁵. As a consequence of the ability to read Japanese naval communications traffic the Americans were almost as well informed on what was planned as the Japanese commanders.

The extent of the advance knowledge of Japanese operations is shown by the following extracts from FRUMEL records:

“9th April 1942 3. C-in-C Combined Fleet today asked for a report on progress of repairs to KAGA. He requires her services as soon as possible since she is due to take part in the “RZP” campaign. (Comments 1. “RZP” is the place designator for Moresby.”⁶

“4th May 1942 7. Message to 5th Cruiser Division and 5th Carrier Squadron gives the following programme for the “MO” Striking Force: On X-minus 2 or 3 day they are to – to the SE of Moresby and attack bases in the Moresby area.

If the Allied Striking Force is found in –, the “MO” Striking Force is to proceed via NNE of “RX” (Solomons) and then proceed south. At 0600 on 6th May after

available striking forces in the Coral Sea area.

American Response

As the picture of the intended Japanese plans began to develop Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet, deployed his two available carrier groups. Rear Admiral Aubrey Fitch commander of TF11 centred on the USS LEXINGTON was ordered to sail and join Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher's TF17, centred on the USS YORKTOWN, in the Coral Sea. The YORKTOWN group was returning to the Coral Sea after replenishing and conducting a short maintenance period at Tongatabu in the Tonga Islands. From the south was deployed the cruiser force, TF44, commanded by Rear Admiral John Crace RN.

This combined force, under the command of Rear Admiral Fletcher, was designated Task Force 17 and organised as follows:

• **Attack Group.** Commanded by Rear Admiral T.C. Kinkaid consisting of the cruisers USS MINNEAPOLIS (flagship), NEW ORLEANS, ASTORIA, CHESTER and PORTLAND. Supported by the destroyers PHELPS, DEWEY, FARRAGUT, AYLWIN and MONAGHAN.

• **Support Group.** Commanded by Rear Admiral J.G. Crace RN and consisting of the cruisers HMA Ships AUSTRALIA (flagship), HOBART and USS CHICAGO supported by the destroyers USS PERKINS and WALLE.

• **Air Group.** Commanded by Rear Admiral A.W. Fitch and consisting of the aircraft carriers USS LEXINGTON

(flagship) and YORKTOWN and supported by the destroyers USS MORRIS, ANDERSON, HAMMANN and RUSSELL.

- **Fuelling Group.** Commanded by Commander J.S. Phillips and consisting of the oilers USS NEOSHO and TIPPECANOE supported by the destroyers USS SIMS and WORDEN.
- **Search Group.** Commanded by Commander G.H. de Baun and consisting of the seaplane tender USS TANGIER, based at Noumea, and 12 patrol aircraft.
- **Eastern Australian Submarine Group.** Commanded by Rear Admiral Francis W. Rockwell and consisting of the submarines; S42, S43, S44, S45, S46, S47, S37, S38, S39, S40 and S 41.
- **Allied Air Forces.** Commanded by Lieutenant General George H. Brett and consisting of Allied aircraft based in Australia and New Guinea.

In the Pacific Fleet headquarters at Pearl Harbor a large chart of the Coral Sea area was laid out and staff commenced plotting the movements of the two opposing forces. An orange* line traced the expected movements of the Japanese fleet whilst blue lines showed the converging Allied forces. After their return from the Tokyo raid Rear Admiral William F. Halsey's two carriers were quickly refuelled and replenished and sailed on the 30 April.

The deployment and operation of the American naval forces into the Coral Sea was further complicated by the fact that the Coral Sea lay in the newly created South West Pacific Area, under the control of General Douglas MacArthur. This prevented Commander De Baun from sending his patrol aircraft into the area where Brett's aircraft were to be searching, even though "it was physically impossible for the to do it".⁹ The submarines were to patrol the coastal waters of New Guinea, the Louisiades and the Bismark Sea. Again they did not cross the demarcation line and patrol the approaches to the Solomons. Had they done so then the movements of Tagaki's carriers into the Coral Sea may have been detected. Fletcher was also reliant on MacArthur's command for the provision of timely intelligence information on the movements of the Japanese. Information from these aircraft was first evaluated by local command staff and then what they considered relevant was passed onto Fletcher. The fact that the Coral Sea battleground straddled two different operational commands did complicate matters.

Opening Moves

On 1 May, the two American carrier groups rendezvoused and began to refuel from their attendant oilers. The YORKTOWN group completed fuelling first and, when Rear Admiral Fitch advised

Rear Admiral Fletcher that he did not expect to complete fuelling till noon on the 4 May, Fletcher decided to move the YORKTOWN group further to the north-west. He advised Rear Admiral Fitch of his intention and of a new rendezvous. The second rendezvous, set for the morning of the 4th May would see the Australian cruisers AUSTRALIA and HOBART join the force for the first time.

As the Americans were refuelling and attempting to position themselves so that they could intercept any Japanese naval forces, the SHOKAKU and ZUIKAKU were sailing from Truk and by the 3 May, as the Tulagi Invasion Group was landing, were north east of Rabaul. With the successful occupation of Tulagi Operation MO was well and truly underway.

On receiving advice of the landings at Tulagi Fletcher turned the YORKTOWN group to the north east and increased speed to 27 knots with a view to launching strikes against Tulagi on the morning of 4 May. As YORKTOWN headed for Tulagi the Fletcher detached the tanker, NEOSHO and her escorting destroyer RUSSELL to rendezvous with Fitch and Crace and advise them of his intentions and of a new rendezvous planned for the morning of the 5 May some 300 miles south of Guadalcanal.

By 0630 on the morning of the 4th YORKTOWN was in a position to be able to launch carrier strikes against Tulagi. The first strike arrived at Tulagi about 0815 and commenced to attack Japanese shipping in the harbour. A total of three strikes were launched by YORKTOWN against Tulagi. By the end of the day the Americans had sunk the destroyer KIKAZUKI, four landing barges and destroyed five floatplanes whilst damaging the minelayer OKINOSHIMA and a destroyer. All this was achieved at a cost of three aircraft, 22 torpedoes, 76 1000lb bombs and thousand of rounds of machine gun ammunition. Whilst these strikes would have confirmed any suspicions the Japanese had as to the presence of American carriers in the Coral Sea, they also destroyed the Japanese reconnaissance capability out of Tulagi and so reduced the number of long range aircraft available to the Japanese, particularly in the north east Coral Sea.

On completion of the strikes against Tulagi, Fletcher retired to the south to rendezvous with Fitch and Crace. After making the rendezvous on the morning of the 5 May Fletcher commenced to refuel his ships. On completion of refuelling Fletcher headed for the Louisiade Archipelago to intercept the Japanese forces he expected to pass through there en-route to Port Moresby. Meanwhile the carriers of Admiral Tagaki's Carrier Striking Force were rounding the southern tip of the Solomons and about to enter the Coral Sea behind the American carriers.

On the 6th a Japanese land based

reconnaissance aircraft spotted the American carrier group refuelling but this information did not reach Tagaki until the next day. Fletcher was advised that B17s made an unsuccessful attack on the SHOHO and other Japanese naval units and transports which were sighted heading south from Rabaul. Aircraft launched that afternoon by the Americans flew over the Japanese carriers without spotting them due to the heavy cloud cover. Tagaki, meanwhile having found nothing, headed north and commenced to refuel, only 70 miles away from Fletcher's carriers. At the end of the day Fletcher, having refuelled his ships, detached the almost empty NEOSHO to the south with the destroyer SIMS. (The attached map¹⁰ shows the movements of ships for the period 30 April to 8 May.)

Coral Sea Battle

Early on the morning of the 7th Fletcher split his force by detaching Crace and the Support Group to cover the Jomard Passage and intercept the invasion force as it exited. This was an extremely risky decision and perhaps the most important in the entire battle. For not only did Fletcher weaken his own air defences but he also exposed Crace's ships to the possibility of air attack without hope of fighter protection, as occurred with HM Ships PRINCE OF WALES and REPULSE. On being located by Japanese aircraft at 0810 Crace's Support Group assumed a diamond formation and waited for the inevitable air attacks. These commenced in the afternoon with attacks by Japanese land based aircraft.

On their return to Rabaul the Japanese reported that they had sunk a battleship and damaged a second and a cruiser. In actual fact not one hit was scored by any attacking aircraft, including a group of American B17s which accidentally attacked the cruisers later in the day. This remarkable achievement was put down to the skilful shiphandling of Crace and his commanding officers. As a result of the inaccurate battle reports no further strikes were launched from Rabaul. Crace was not free to intercept the invasion force, when as expected, it emerged from the Jomard Passage. However, Admiral Inouye had ordered the Moresby invasion force to reverse course whilst the situation with regard to the "battleship" sightings was clarified. Had Crace's ships been with Fletcher's carriers the invasion force would have been able to proceed onto Port Moresby.

At the same time as Crace had been spotted the Japanese had commenced to launch, from the SHOKAKU and ZUIKAKU, a 78 plane strike against a reported American carrier and cruiser sighted to the south. About an hour later a second report arrived advising the Japanese that an American carrier and about ten other ships were sighted 280 miles to his north

west. As it was too late to recall the strike all that Rear Admiral Tadaichi Hara, commander of the 5th Carrier Division, could do was wait for the return of his aircraft. The two American ships were located at 0954 and the Japanese immediately realised their error. They were about to attack the oiler NEOSHO and the destroyer SIMS. During the course of the attacks that followed the SIMS was reduced to a wreck, and sunk, whilst the NEOSHO was severely damaged. She was later sunk by torpedoes and gunfire from the USS HENLEY.

Whilst the Japanese were shadowing Crace and preparing to attack the NEOSHO and SIMS the Americans were attempting to locate the Japanese carriers. At 0815 a sighting report was received indicating that a force of two carriers and four cruisers were 235 miles northwest of the Americans. This report was, unfortunately, inaccurate as what had been sighted were two cruisers and some minor craft. However, acting on this report Fletcher immediately commenced to launch a strike of some 90 aircraft from both carriers. It was after the last of the aircraft were launched that the error was realised. However, Fletcher decided to let the strike continue. At 1022 a message was received that land based aircraft had spotted a carrier, SHOHO, and other ships a few miles north of Misima Island. The outbound strike was then re-directed to the location of the SHOHO.

When sighted by the American aircraft, at around 1100, SHOHO and her consorts were in an area of clear weather with excellent visibility. SHOHO could not launch any aircraft at this stage because she was in the process of refuelling her fighters which had been flying reconnaissance

missions. As SHOHO was turning into the wind to launch her aircraft the main American attack, which was delayed whilst the slower torpedo bombers arrived, started. LEXINGTON's dive bombers and torpedo bombers made a co-ordinated attack followed almost immediately by YORKTOWN's dive bombers. By the time YORKTOWN's torpedo aircraft arrived SHOHO was already doomed. Unfortunately, instead of attacking the other Japanese ships they continued the attack on SHOHO, which eventually received approximately 13 bomb and seven torpedo hits. Not one other Japanese ship in the group was damaged.

By 1335 the Americans had recovered their aircraft and Fletcher was debating whether to launch another strike against the remaining Japanese ships. However, he decided against this on the grounds that the other Japanese carriers still had not been located. Later in the afternoon Fletcher learnt of the attack on the NEOSHO. But again an incorrect position had been given. Meanwhile Admiral Tagaki on learning of the attack on the SHOHO was powerless to act because of his earlier decision in attacking the incorrectly reported aircraft carrier and cruiser, NEOSHO and SIMS. However, once his aircraft returned Tagaki decided to launch a later afternoon strike against the American carriers, though he had no firm idea as to their position.

For this attempted strike Tagaki selected his most experienced aircrew, mainly as the aircraft would be returning in the dark. The 12 dive bombers and 15 torpedo bombers launched in three groups at 1630 hoping to locate and attack the Americans at dusk. As it was they could not locate the Americans and jettisoned their ordnance for the return

flight. On the return flight one group of Japanese almost flew over the top of the Americans, and failed to see them. Unfortunately, the American carriers were using their radar to good effect and intercepted the returning Japanese. In the ensuing melee eight Japanese were shot down for the loss of three Americans. But more importantly from the Japanese side Tagaki had lost eight (almost 10%) of his most experienced aircrew. Two other groups arrived at where they thought their carriers were and commenced a search. When three aircraft saw a carrier and attempted to land after giving the correct recognition signals YORKTOWN's gunners opened fire and the aircraft retired. All in all only 18 aircraft returned to the Japanese carriers. Later that night both commanders contemplated sending their surface ships out to attack the opposing carrier force, and both rejected the idea because they expected attacks the next morning and needed the ships to provide additional anti-aircraft firepower.

On the morning of the 8th both sides were to locate their opponents almost simultaneously. At 0900 the Americans commenced to launch their aircraft whilst the Japanese commenced at 0915. Both the Japanese and Americans passed each other as they headed for their respective targets. The heavy cloud, which had dogged the entire operation prevented any sightings.

The first American aircraft, dive bombers from YORKTOWN, arrived over the two Japanese carriers, which were operating separate groups, at 1030. They had to wait another ten minutes for the arrival of the slower torpedo bombers before commencing an attack. At 1057 YORKTOWN's aircraft attacked the SHOKAKU, the ZUIKAKU had managed in the meantime to hide in a



American personnel abandon USS LEXINGTON on 8 May 1942

rain squall. Again the inexperience of the American aircrew showed, with bombs and torpedoes generally being released too far away. SHOKAKU managed to avoid all the torpedoes that were fired at her but she was hit by a number of bombs. The damage done and fires started prevented her from launching aircraft. Only part of LEXINGTON's strike arrived due to difficulties in locating the targets in the squally weather. After they arrived they commenced to attack the Japanese carrier.

Whilst the American aircraft were commencing their attack on SHOKAKU the Japanese were detected by LEXINGTON's radar at 70 miles and closing. At this stage there were only eight fighters in the air, all short on fuel, with a further nine aircraft having just landed on LEXINGTON and in the process of being refuelled. Perhaps because of the fuel problem, or inexperience, the fighter direction officer on LEXINGTON placed his combat air patrol too close to the ships and at such an altitude that they were below the dive bombers and above the torpedo bombers. In either case, they could do little to break up the Japanese attack which commenced at 1118. Two minutes later LEXINGTON was hit on the port side forward by a torpedo and then a second hit opposite the bridge. After the torpedo bombers came the dive bombers which scored at least two hits and several near misses. As a result of these attacks fuel tanks were ruptured and the ship was on fire in at least four places and developed a 6 degrees list to port.

YORKTOWN was also attacked by the Japanese but managed to avoid the torpedoes, which were launched from only one side, but was hit by one bomb. This bomb hit reduced YORKTOWN's speed to 24 knots. At about 1230 the American strike group began to return and as LEXINGTON's aircraft lifts were jammed in the upright position she could retrieve her aircraft. Shortly after this the ship was rocked by a large internal explosion caused by the build up of petrol fumes. This explosion started new fires which were fed by oil and other flammables. This fire gradually spread and at 1707 the order was given to abandon ship. LEXINGTON was finally sunk by torpedo from the destroyer PHELPS. With the last of LEXINGTON's aircraft onboard YORKTOWN the remainder of the force withdrew to the south and thence to Pearl Harbor.

Fortunately for the Americans the Japanese were not in a position to take advantage of the loss of the LEXINGTON. SHOKAKU was so badly damaged that she had to return to Truk for repairs before going onto Japan. An entry in the FRUMEL records for the 10th gives her intended itinerary for the return voyage with the comment "Looks like a reasonable submarine target"¹¹. A warning of what was to come for the

Japanese merchant fleet. The second carrier, ZUIKAKU, was low on fuel and had less than forty serviceable aircraft left. As a consequence of this Admiral Inouye ordered the Moresby invasion postponed and the ships to retire. Admiral Yamamoto however, ordered Tagaki and Goto to pursue the Americans. The Japanese broke off the search on the 11 May, due to the allocation of insufficient forces Yamamoto had missed his chance to destroy a large proportion of the US Pacific Fleet.

Admiral Fletcher returned with YORKTOWN to Pearl Harbor where battle damage was made good and the carrier prepared for the forthcoming battle of Midway. Admiral Crace, who had spent the last few days blocking the approaches to Port Moresby, was apparently not advised of the end of the battle nor of Fletcher's departure from the area. Crace departed the area on the 10 May and sailed for Cid Harbor to refuel from HMAS KURUMBA. Shortly after arriving at Cid Harbour he received a signal from Fletcher acknowledging his services in the battle.

The Aftermath

Both the Japanese and the Allies have portrayed the Battle of the Coral Sea as a victory. In a sense they are both right. On the Japanese part they managed to sink more American ships than they lost. Whilst the Allies prevented the Japanese from achieving their objective, the occupation of Port Moresby, as well as reducing the forces available for the forthcoming Midway operation.

Against this, on the part of the Americans, must be weighed the fact that the Japanese assault forces remained intact and all that had stood in the way of the Japanese and Port Moresby were Crace's cruisers. Fletcher's carriers, which were engaged in trying to locate and destroy the Japanese carriers, were too far away and too busy to provide any opposition or support if required. The decision by Fletcher to weaken his forces by detaching Crace had proved to be the correct one, even though this may have contributed to the loss of the LEXINGTON. Whilst many Australian's today may scoff at the fears of a Japanese invasion during 1942 the fact is that for many Australians during the 1940s that fear was a real as space travel is today.

Notwithstanding its inconclusive nature, the battle of the Coral Sea's place in history has been assured. For the first time two fleets had fought a naval engagement and the constituent naval units never saw each other. When coupled with the attacks on Taranto, Pearl Harbor and finally the Battle of Midway it marked the end of the battleship as the major striking unit of modern fleets. Subsequent naval operations, whilst demonstrating the need for a well balanced and highly trained naval force, were to highlight the flexibility of carrier borne airpower.

¹ Barnett, Correlli, *Engage The Enemy More Closely - The Royal Navy In The Second World War*. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1991, p 861

² Spector, Ronald, *Eagle Against the Sun - The American War With Japan*, Viking Penguin Ltd, New York, 1985, P155

³ Costello, John, *The Pacific War*, William Collins Sons and Co Ltd, London, 1981, p236

⁴ *ibid*, p8

⁵ Costello, *op cit* p247

⁶ Australian Archives CRS B5555 File 3 FRUMEL records (incomplete) of Communications Intelligence Relating to the Coral Sea Battle APR 42 - MAY 42, p1

⁷ *ibid*, p4

⁸ Orange was the colour used by the Americans to designate Japan in their war plans. War Plan Orange was first completed in 1914 and then continuously updated. The 'colour' war plans were replaced by a new series of war plans numbered Rainbow 1 to Rainbow 5 during 1939.

⁹ Morison, S.E. *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: Volume IV Coral Sea Midway and Submarine May 1942 - August 1942*. Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1950, p 30

¹⁰ Admiralty, *op cit*, p 57

¹¹ Australian Archives CRS B5555, *op cit*, p 6

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