Coral Sea: Saviour or Stepping Stone?
The Battles Role in Australia’s Safety During World War II

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The Battle’s Role in Australia’s Safety During World War II

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Abstract

A Japanese plan to invade Australia during World War Two has been much disputed. Nevertheless, the safety of Australia throughout the Pacific campaign, especially during 1942, was far from assured. This thesis examines the impact of the Battle of the Coral Sea in maintaining the safety of Australia during the Second World War. The impact of the battle has been undecided over the years. It was originally dubbed the battle that saved Australia. This view, has however, changed over the ensuing years. Several theories have been put forward over those years, including that the battle was indeed what saved Australia, whilst other battles such as Kokoda have also claimed this honour. On the other hand some commentators have claimed there was no threat of Japanese invasion.

I argue that the Battle of the Coral Sea was a significant milestone in not only the safety of Australia, but in the wider Pacific War. The Battle of the Coral Sea should be seen as being a stepping stone in which the Allies were able to gain control of the Pacific, the first step to the undisputed safety of Australia. To gain a clearer understanding of the role the battle played, we must examine the battle itself, the government response, its relationship to the Battle of Midway and the way in which it has been commemorated.
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To all Allied servicemen who fought and died in the Pacific campaign, your sacrifice to protect our freedom is not forgotten. Lest We Forget.
**Introduction**

*Invasion is a menace capable hourly of becoming an actuality. I tell you bluntly that the whole world may very well shake within the next few weeks under the blows that full-scale warfare will strike – and Australia cannot escape a blow. We face vital, perilous weeks fraught with exceedingly important happenings for Australia.*¹

- Prime Minister John Curtin

Australia entered the Second World War on 3 September 1939 when Britain declared war on Germany following the German invasion of Poland. Fighting alongside British forces, Australians had been located in North Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Although the Australian Army was not involved in direct conflict until 1941, the Royal Australian Navy and Air Force had been reasonably active. Australian pilots had taken part in the Battle of Britain, whilst the navy had been quite successful in the Mediterranean. War seemed a distant activity from the Australian mainland. This changed on 7 December 1941, when the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor, the United States naval base in Hawaii. This surprise attack, one of history’s most infamous days, brought the war closer to Australia. Although the United States military was sparked into action, they were unable to produce any results of great significance for several months. The Japanese had begun an unrelenting wave of successful attacks throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Islands began falling like dominos.

Americans were now in a war from which they had so long abstained, and the war was bearing down on Australia.

The fall of Singapore in February 1942 and the rapid Japanese expansion through the Philippines were major factors in the early parts of the Pacific campaign. These two island nations left the rest of the South Asia-Pacific region vulnerable to attack. The British had lost two of their most powerful warships, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, in Asian waters at the end of 1941, and the Battle of Sunda Strait caused further losses for the Allies in early 1942. The Pacific situation was becoming a nightmare for the Allies as they were systematically pushed out of the Asia-Pacific region.

The Japanese occupation of Singapore and the Dutch East Indies brought the enemy closer to Australia and increased the fear of invasion that the Australian population felt. The war came to Australian shores on 19 February 1942 when Darwin was bombed. This marked the first time that the Australian mainland had come under attack from an enemy force. Prime Minister John Curtin stated at the time that Australians should “vow that this blow at Darwin and the loss it has involved and the suffering it has occasioned shall gird our loins and nerve our steel.”  

By November 1943 Darwin had been bombed over 60 times. Bombings of several towns in Western Australia and Queensland also occurred during 1942 and 1943.

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The Japanese push south would eventually lead to a significant clash. This occurred in the Coral Sea. The Battle of the Coral Sea eventuated from the Japanese advance southwards and occurred between 4 and 8 May 1942. It was the Japanese intention to capture Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea; this was to be known as Operation MO. The battle provided an opportunity for the Allies to gain some confidence in a war which was quickly slipping away in the Pacific. It also allowed an opportunity for the Australian public to gain some relief, even for a short while, from the perceived threat of invasion.

The Battle of the Coral Sea has been ranked as one of the most pivotal battles of the Second World War.\(^4\) It proved to be not only a battle which provided for the security of Australia; it also changed the way in which war would be fought at sea. This was an engagement in which surface ships did not sight each other or exchange direct fire. All the fighting was conducted between aircraft. The aircraft carrier would go on to play a vital role in the Pacific War.

The success of the Battle of the Coral Sea must be examined in several ways. As with all battles, the victor must be acknowledged, but in the Coral Sea there was no decisive victor. The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) can be considered the tactical victors, whilst the Allies without doubt won the strategic battle and took the impetus from the battle. Coral Sea enabled the Allies to hold back, if only

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\(^4\) History Channel, “The Greatest Battles of World War II”  
temporarily, the Japanese advance. There should be no assumption that the battle
won the war, nor did this battle singlehandedly secure the freedom of Australia
from a possible invasion. There should, however, be an acknowledgment of the
battle’s role in providing a starting block from which the Allies could secure
victory in the Pacific and also eradicate the possibility of an invasion, or at the
least isolation, of Australia.

There have been several books specifically written about the Battle of the Coral
Sea, whilst it has also been mentioned in those written generally on the Pacific
War. This should be no surprise. Neither the largest, nor most famous of the
many battles which took place in the Pacific, Coral Sea played a significant role
in the security of Australia and the overall victory of the Allies. Publications such
as The Barrier and the Javelin and Naval Warfare 1919-1945 are of a general
nature, but, both books provide considerable discussion of the Coral Sea
engagement.⁵ Other books, such as Action Stations Coral Sea: The Australian
Commander’s Story, are devoted to the battle the people and events surrounding
it.⁶

The Battle of the Coral Sea was arguably the beginning of the end for the
Japanese in the Pacific. The battle’s impact on the security of Australia and the

⁵ HP. Willmott, The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies February to June 1942,
Malcolm Murfett, Naval Warfare 1919-1945: An operational history of the volatile war at sea, (Oxon:
Routledge, 2009).
⁶ Chris Coulthard-Clark, Action Stations Coral Sea: The Australian Commander’s Story, Sydney: Allen and
prevention of a possible invasion, or at the least, isolation, has not been discussed as in-depth as the battle itself. Yes, it has been dubbed the battle which saved Australia by several authors; however, there has been minimal detailed discussion of this, especially in recent times. The aim of this thesis is to discuss the role and the use of the Battle of the Coral Sea in relation to Australian security during World War Two.

H.P. Willmott has noted that the Battle of the Coral Sea was a battle which the Japanese needed to win quickly and effectively if they were to be successful in the Pacific. The failure of the Japanese to secure Port Moresby through Operation MO led to their downfall at Midway. This comparison and connection with the Battle of Midway is another way in which Willmott has discussed the battle. This analysis is an essential aspect of determining the Battle of the Coral Sea’s effectiveness in the war and in particular its impact on Australia in 1942 and beyond.

There should be no doubt as to what impact the Japanese capture of Port Moresby would have had on the security of Australia. G. Hermon Gill asserts that the Japanese would have been able to operate “air bases to facilitate air operations against Australia”. Such beliefs as this contribute to the importance of the battle. This book, however, does not solely deal with the battle or the consequences of it. Richard W. Bates of the Naval War College wrote in 1947 about a strategic and

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tactical analysis of the battle as well as noting the effect on Australia. Bates has provided an in-depth account of how and why the Coral Sea Battle came about but does not focus on the role of the battle in the eyes of Australians at the time.

Many newspaper articles have been written regarding the battle and its implications. These were primarily written during the war and in the immediate years following. This range of articles discusses what the battle meant for Australia and its impact on the greater war. Titles such as “Coral Sea Battle: Complacency Danger” and “The sea battles which shaped history: Coral Sea and Midway” are examples of articles which show the importance of the battle. They also show that the battle was not the sole reason for safety in Australia. These articles, written in 1942 and 1950 respectively, have become the exception rather than the norm. In 1992, *The Australian* published an article regarding the possibility of an invasion, noting that Australia may not have come under a substantial threat of invasion had the battle turned out differently. This is an example of how opinions of the battle’s success have changed over time. The argument presented in *The Australian* renders the strategic success of the battle of little worth.

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Naval historian Samuel E. Morison has written extensively on naval operations in the Second World War. The Coral Sea battle has been written about in Morison’s volume four of *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* as well as in another of his publications, *The Two-Ocean War*. Although a comprehensive history of the battle, these two publications fail to comprehensively cover the battle’s impact on any Japanese invasion attempt of Australia.

The majority of publications which discuss the battle have only skinned the surface in terms of talking about the effects of the Battle of the Coral Sea on the safety of Australia throughout the Second World War, preferring to discuss the role of larger battles. This is evident in Charles Bateson’s *The War With Japan: A Concise History*. The possibility of invasion is only briefly discussed, perhaps due to the fact that after the battle the war continued and more battles were associated with the protection of Australia. Whilst the newspapers of the time associated the Coral Sea with salvation, as time progressed, new views were formed as to its importance. This has become evident in publications of the second half of the twentieth century as well as that of the twenty-first. The Coral Sea should, however, not be discounted as playing a vital role in the safety of Australia.

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Although historians and other commentators have noted the impact of the Battle of the Coral Sea on a potential Japanese invasion of Australia, the majority of work is centred on the battle itself. From wartime publications which stated it was a saviour through to modern times when it has been viewed as less significant, the battle has had substantial public coverage. Additional resources are required to assess the role of the battle in maintaining security and stability of the Australian mainland during not only 1942, but also the remainder of the war.

No one battle can claim to win a war; each battle is significant in winning a war. The Battle of the Coral Sea cannot claim to be an exception, nor can it be seen as the sole saviour of Australia. It can, however, be considered as a stepping stone in the ultimate security of Australia during the war. It must be noted that other battles such as Midway, Guadalcanal and Kokoda also played a large part in Australia’s security. At this same time, it must be acknowledged that the victories which took place in those locations may not have been possible if Coral Sea was not first a success. The success of Coral Sea allowed the Allies to gain confidence and work towards victory at Midway, whilst also giving confidence to other military units in land battles at Kokoda and Guadalcanal. If any of these battles were unsuccessful, then the security of Australia might once again have been in jeopardy and the achievements of the Battle of the Coral Sea would have been undermined.

In saying this, the role which the battle played in Australian history, particularly its security during the war, must be examined. The government response, its
comparison with the Battle of Midway, and the way in which the Coral Sea engagement has been memorialised and remembered are all critical in determining this. These three topics help explain how the battle shaped the course of the war with regard to Australia.

It could be said that the battle was a strategic victory of convenience. The battle was what the Australian public needed in early 1942 as the future had been looking bleak due to the increasing Japanese expansion. The battle enabled Prime Minister John Curtin to rally the public much like British PM Winston Churchill did during the Battle of Britain. It provided positive news from which Curtin could inform the public to remain vigilant, as the war could now take a positive direction.

The battle also introduced Australians to the power of the American military. US troops and sailors remained based in Australia as they continued to fight across the South Pacific. This relationship continued to grow throughout the war and also in the years after. In today’s society, Americans are thanked for their involvement in the protection of Australia throughout the war. The relationship of the two nations has resulted in such treaties as ANZUS and the formation of the Australian-American Association. This has provided another aspect as to why the battle was significant.
It should be noted that the Battle of the Coral Sea was not a decisive victory in terms of securing Australia’s safety, as many battles that followed also played a vital role in this. The Australian government even introduced conscription well after the end of the Coral Sea. This decision must be seen in conjunction with the Coral Sea and its effective nature in preventing an invasion of Australia as was reported at the time. The government decision to change legislation to allow conscripts to fight overseas in a specified area close to Australia arguably shows that the battle was not as definitive as once believed.

This thesis analyses the perception of the battle and the way in which it affected any potential Japanese attempt at invasion or isolation. The government response and thoughts on the battle through to its link to Midway and how it has been commemorated in the years since are all pivotal in recognising its impact. The Battle of the Coral Sea is not only an important piece of military history but also Australian history. It should be remembered not as the battle which saved Australia, but rather a battle which shaped battles yet to come, giving the Allies confidence after months of devastating defeats. The Battle of the Coral Sea should be seen as a stepping stone to victory in the Pacific and the safety and security of Australia.