This thesis is presented for the Honours degree of History of Murdoch University

Submitted November 2011

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Thesis Title: Coral Sea: Saviour or Stepping Stone?

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

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Year: 2011
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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Acknowledgments

With gratitude I acknowledge the following people for their support, assistance, advice and encouragement in the preparation of this thesis:

Dr Michael Sturma, thank you for all your support, advice and encouragement throughout the year. Also, thank you for your patience and for answering all my questions.

To my mother, father and sister, Mary and Orlando and Shelley, thank you for all your support and encouragement, without it I would not have been able to complete my university studies.

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. The

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.” ² By November 1943 Darwin had been bombed over 60 times.³ Bombings of several towns in Western Australia and Queensland also occurred during 1942 and 1943.


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. 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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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

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 skimmed 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.

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.
Chapter 1

Hands to Action Stations: New Generation Warfare

In May 1942, the Japanese pushed south towards Papua New Guinea in an attempt to capture Port Moresby. As a strategically placed city, Port Moresby would enable them to control the Coral Sea and ultimately cut the supply and communication lines between Australia and the United States. This amphibious assault was to be known as Operation MO. The United States were yet to assert themselves in a dominant and offensive manner in the Pacific. The Japanese were beginning to feel that they could gain further control of the Asia-Pacific region relatively unhindered. The Battle of the Coral Sea became pivotal in the course of the Pacific War, as the first encounter between the Japanese and Allied forces in which the Japanese did not achieve a decisive victory.

The Battle of the Coral Sea resulted from this Japanese push south and Operation MO, the attempt to take Port Moresby by an amphibious assault. It was, as the US Naval War College said in 1947, an inevitable result of the Japanese thirst for southward expansion, and the United States’ wish to prevent such an advance. Japanese success would hamper America’s coalition with Australia and prevent strategic bases in the region being utilised.  

were able to capture Port Moresby, they would have been able to control the Coral Sea and many of the surrounding islands, disrupting the supply and communication lines between Australia and the United States.

Many theories have been put forth, both contemporaneously and later, about the Japanese intentions concerning Australia. Alleged policies such as the Brisbane Line have created arguments over the Australian government’s thoughts on a Japanese invasion.\(^{15}\) It can be presumed that even if an invasion was not planned, the isolation of Australia might have the same effect as an invasion. Malcolm Murfett, however, suggests that an invasion of Australia was ruled out due to the Japanese plan to take Midway. Port Moresby, coming under Japanese control, would have sufficiently satisfied them, as they would have been able to control the shipping lanes between Australia and the Solomon Islands, as well as the shipping lanes between Australia and the United States.\(^{16}\) They would have effectively nullified the US presence in the region due to Australian bases not being available.

The battle has been described as one which was definitive in the region, but it is also known as one which was riddled with mistakes by both sides. According to naval historian Samuel E. Morison, “The ensuing action was full of mistakes, both humorous and tragic, wrong estimates and assumptions, bombing the wrong


ships, missing great opportunities and cashing in accidently on minor ones”. The high number of mistakes could be due to the fact that a new type of naval warfare was introduced at the battle. The entire battle was fought by carrier aircraft, without a ship ever sighting an enemy vessel. Aircraft from both sides were equipped with bombs and torpedoes.

The Japanese arguably did not plan a sufficient force of both men and resources for a task which was to cover such a large geographic area. The operation did not just aim to take Port Moresby, but also to establish air bases in the Solomon Islands. This would enable the Japanese to control a complete chain of islands. The Americans had already suffered dismal losses since their entry into the war, however, they were beginning to claw their way back. The recent bombings of Tokyo in April, known as the Doolittle Raid, had unsettled the Japanese, and as became apparent, these bombings played a significant role in the Battle of the Coral Sea.18 The Japanese had underestimated the Allied force present, since they believed much of the fleet would be returning to Pearl Harbor after the attacks on the Japanese mainland.

As H.P. Willmott states, “The Japanese determination to secure Port Moresby and the equally strong American determination to prevent their doing so produced the first major fleet action”.19 This battle’s significance was not limited to it being the

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first in which enemy ships never sighted each other while the fighting was done by carrier aircraft. It has been pointed out that the Japanese were known for the over complication of their plans, and Operation MO was no different. The Japanese had decided that advance air bases would be needed in the South Pacific to ensure they gained complete control of the Solomon Islands. Due to this, the capture of the islands of Santa Isabel and Tulagi in the Solomons were added to the operation. After learning of an imminent Japanese advance in the region, US Admiral Chester Nimitz was adamant not to let the chance of striking a blow to the Japanese slip away. The Americans were keen to cause a major disruption for the Japanese for the first time since the attack on Pearl Harbor months earlier.

Three Allied naval task forces were ordered to the Coral Sea; these were to be under the overall command of Admiral Frank J. Fletcher. 20

The battle involved three Allied naval task forces: Task Force 11 based around the aircraft carrier USS Lexington, Task Force 17 which contained the USS Yorktown and Task Force 44 comprised of destroyers and cruisers including the Australian ships Australia and Hobart. These task forces were ordered to ensure the Japanese were not able to capitalise on their recent victories. Allied code breakers had received intelligence suggesting that the Japanese were moving south in the general vicinity of the Coral Sea, but were unclear of the exact Japanese intentions. 21

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21 Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin*, 204.
essential part of not only the Battle of the Coral Sea, but indeed of the entire Pacific War.\textsuperscript{22}

Task Forces 11 and 17 were to rendezvous on 1 May, 250 miles from Espirito Santo, Vanuatu. Meanwhile Task Force 44 was steaming north after leaving Sydney the same day. Task Force 44 was redesignated Task Force 17.3 for the duration of the battle. Commanded by Rear Admiral Crace, TF 17.3 did not reach the Coral Sea and meet up with TF 11 and 17 until 4 May. Meanwhile, according to Willmott, a Dauntless aircraft antisubmarine patrol launched from Task Force 17 spotted the \textit{I-21} Japanese submarine on 2 May, just thirty-two miles from the \textit{Yorktown}. As a result of this sighting, Fletcher decided to move further west, to avoid the \textit{I-21} and gain a position behind the Japanese force coming from the north.\textsuperscript{23}

The Japanese invasion force involving the carriers \textit{Zuikaku} and \textit{Shokaku} were in a hurry to complete Operation MO, and sail north for the offensive against Midway, planned to begin on 1 June.\textsuperscript{24} This rush and the perceived over-complication of the operation could be seen as a weakness in the Japanese operation. It ultimately dampened the result at not only the Coral Sea where “even as it began, Japan’s tightly scheduled naval operation started falling apart”, but also at Midway the following month.\textsuperscript{25} Costello remarks that the Japanese

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 177.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 205-6.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 253.
were guilty of underestimating the American force present in the area. They believed that the *Lexington* had previously been sunk by a submarine in January and that the carriers which had recently taken part in the Doolittle Raid would be on their way back to Hawaii.\(^{26}\)

On 3 May, the Japanese 3rd Kure Special Landing Force began the invasion of Tulagi. Fletcher decided it was best to launch an airstrike against Tulagi and the invasion force. This was not possible, however, until 4 May, due to the position of the task forces. Murfett purports that this mission was somewhat a waste of time and fuel, as the Japanese Special Forces had already landed and the ships they travelled on had moved out to sea.\(^{27}\) Costello notes that Fletcher may have in fact sent exaggerated reports on the numbers of warships sunk to Pearl Harbor as a result of inflated figures sent back by pilots which were involved in the attack on the invasion force.\(^{28}\) Following this disappointing action by the American fleet Fletcher decided to head back to join the other task forces which were 300 nautical miles south of Guadalcanal.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 251.


As the Japanese steamed towards Port Moresby they faced a new problem on how to neutralise the Allied air supremacy in the area. Not only was the air space above Port Moresby controlled by the Allies, but the Allies also had the advantage of aircraft based in nearby Northern Australia. These forces “would still be able to strike at any Japanese force in the western Coral Sea”. Willmott argues that the Japanese attempted Operation MO, which covered a great area, with too few resources. This amounted to “an overall failure of strategic policy”. The Japanese had attempted a raid on Port Moresby on 25 April; this

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29 Willmott, The Barrier and the Javelin, 228.
30 Ibid.
raid caused some heavy damage to the city, but the Japanese also suffered losses.³²

As the Allied task forces and the Japanese invasion force continued steaming into the Coral Sea on 6 May, it was the weather which caused the most havoc. If it had not been for this terrible weather, the Battle of the Coral Sea might have turned out entirely different, with a more traditional naval battle taking place. Although the enemy forces were only 70 nautical miles apart at certain times, the fleets still remained out of sight of each other due to the poor visibility caused by the weather.³³

On the evening of 6 May, Fletcher decided to send the tanker Neosho, which was low on fuel, on its way. It was escorted by the destroyer Sims. On the morning of 7 May, Rear-Admiral Chuichi Hara, who was the commander of the Japanese Carrier Striking Force, decided to head south once again for further aerial surveillance. This proved to be crucial. Reports came through that an enemy carrier and cruiser had been spotted. In fact, they had discovered the Neosho and Sims. Seventy-eight planes were launched and headed directly for the two ships, which were now forced to fight on by themselves. They were no match for the Japanese aircraft which disabled the Neosho and sank the Sims.³⁴ In this attack,

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³² Ibid, 209.
³³ Murfett, Naval Warfare 1919-1945, 178.
the Japanese suffered the loss of six aircraft. According to G. Hermon Gill, they also missed the opportunity to attack Fletcher, who was 270 miles to the WNW.\textsuperscript{35}

Meanwhile, a Japanese reconnaissance plane had also spotted Crace’s TF 17.3, which consisted of three destroyers and three cruisers. The bombings of TF 17.3 began earlier than Crace or his men anticipated, but not from Japanese aircraft. An American fleet of B-26 bombers mistook his task force for the invasion force headed for Port Moresby. It was only Crace’s ability and experience as a capable naval officer, and that of his captains on board the other ships, which averted a complete disaster. Many of the ships came very close to tragedy according to Murfett. Crace and the captains of the ships under his command were able to successfully steer clear of the bombers.\textsuperscript{36} Much of the ensuing action throughout the battle, it can be argued, was marred by erroneous communication between aircraft and ships, and the misinterpretation of class and origin of ships.


\textsuperscript{36} Murfett, \textit{Naval Warfare 1919-1945}, 179.
At 0815, 7 May, Allied aerial reconnaissance spotted Japanese ships approximately 235nm northwest of Fletcher and his task force. Again, the report on the type and number of ships was wrong. Fletcher was under the impression that he had found the carrier striking force. Fletcher quickly set about preparing both the *Lexington* and *Yorktown* for launching aircraft, ninety-three in total, to search for and attack the carrier striking force. What Fletcher did not realise was that the force spotted was merely the support force of Rear Admiral Kuninori Marumo. This Force consisted of two old light cruisers, three gunboats and an

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aircraft depot ship, although it was reported as being four cruisers and two aircraft carriers. 38 This is why it was first reported as being a striking force.

Lieutenant Commander W.L. Hamilton, in a scout plane, spotted the light carrier Shoho. Soon the Shoho had ninety-three planes on top of her. According to Morison, “No ship could have survived such a concentration. After receiving two 1000-pound bomb hits, she burst into flames and went dead in the water”. 39 The Shoho lost three quarters of its aircraft, with 638 Japanese sailors and airmen killed. 40 Five minutes after abandon ship was ordered at 1131, she gave way to the sea and sank. Across the radio came the voice of Lieutenant Commander R. E. Dixon, “Scratch one flattop! Dixon to Carrier, Scratch one flattop!” 41 This ended the first attack on an enemy aircraft carrier by planes launched from an American carrier. During the course of the Pacific campaign, eleven more Japanese carriers would be sunk by Allied planes launched from carriers. Although sinking a Japanese carrier was a great result for the American forces, the outcome was not as great as it could have been. With so many aircraft airborne, and several other Japanese ships in the vicinity, the Americans were somewhat disappointed that only one light carrier was sunk on the day. 42

38 Ibid, 179.
40 Gill, Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945, 47.
41 Morison, History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume 4, 42.
42 Willmott, The Barrier and the Javelin, 245.
Fletcher experienced a great deal of what could be called luck throughout the ensuing battle. His planes had not yet found the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, however, at 1022 hours on 7 May, bombers stumbled upon the Japanese covering force in the vicinity of Misima Island. Meanwhile, Crace and his supporting force had been sent to destroy ships passing through the Jomard Passage which connects the Coral Sea to the Solomon Sea. While at the Jomard Passage, Crace’s force came under fire from Japanese aircraft. Crace did not have the luxury of fighter protection, a situation which had recently cost Allied ships in the region. Both the British warships HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* had been sunk just six months earlier off the coast of Malaya by Japanese bombers. As Willmott described, Crace “and his force had no idea what was happening around them, and Crace was unable to drum up air support from Australia while operating within range of enemy aircraft from Rabaul”. 

Crace tried to provide as small a target as possible for the aircraft by facing his ships directly at them. All torpedoes which were launched from these aircraft missed their targets. Two more waves of attack by high-level bombers followed. The last of these was by American bombers. Fortunately for Crace and his men this bombing was not effective. It is said that Crace reported to General Brett after the battle that, “fortunately their bombing, in comparison with that of the Japanese formation minutes earlier, was disgraceful”.

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Map 1.2: Situation at 1600 on 7 May

An RAN publication has noted that if Fletcher had not decided to send Crace to the Jomard Passage, that the Japanese would have had an unopposed run to Port Moresby. The presence of these warships prevented Admiral Inouye’s invasion force to continue to Port Moresby. The Admiral felt it was best to wait until the situation with Crace had been clarified. This was a major victory for the Allies. As Morison explains, “The Japanese retreat had begun, although nobody yet admitted the fact”. On the evening of 7 May, some disoriented Japanese pilots

49 Royal Australian Navy, “Battle of the Coral Sea”.
mistook the *Yorktown* for one of their own ships and attempted to land on it. Both sides decided not to risk any further loses with a night time engagement.\(^{51}\)

Willmott suggests that following the sinking of the *Shoho*, the American and other Allied forces were in a position to pick their battles. The Japanese, however, now on the retreat, had to force the issue. Their task was made more difficult after not only losing a carrier, but also having their route to Port Moresby blocked by the Allied task force at the Jomard Passage.\(^{52}\) A new battle began 8 May. In this case, the Allies had less protection for their carriers than the previous few days. Crace’s force was still dispatched, leaving the *Yorktown* and *Lexington* somewhat vulnerable with only seven destroyers and five heavy cruisers to protect the two carriers.\(^{53}\) The luck of the day seemed to be with the Japanese. The IJN carriers had been working together for many months, while the *Lexington* and *Yorktown* had only recently joined forces and had little tactical experience with one another. The weather also cleared around the Allied forces, which was in favour of the Japanese since the Allied carriers could be spotted more easily.

On the morning of 8 May, both sides began sending out planes to search for the enemy. Both sides spotted each other at approximately 0815. Once the Japanese were spotted, Fletcher felt it best to hand over tactical command to Admiral Fitch, who had superior experience with the operations of aircraft carriers.\(^{54}\) This day became a turning point, not just in the Battle of the Coral Sea, but the Pacific

\(^{51}\) Costello, *The Pacific War*, 257.

\(^{52}\) Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin*, 247.


\(^{54}\) Costello, *The Pacific War*, 258.
War. It is evident from Willmott that the losses that the Japanese suffered became pivotal in the following months, especially at Midway. “Losses incurred on the eighth cost the Japanese not only their chance to bring Operation MO to a successful conclusion but their margin of superiority at Midway”. The battle, which began as an opportunity for the Americans to restore some sort of balance of power in the Pacific, ended with not only this balance, but also gave the Americans the advantage.

Map 1.3: Situation at 0800 on 8 May

At 0915 a thirty-nine plane strike force set off from Yorktown and discovered the Shokaku and Zuikaku an hour and three quarters later. They were heading towards

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56 Ibid, 231.
the south east and were being screened by two destroyers and heavy cruisers. The weather once again came into play, with the *Zuikaku* heading into a squall of tropical rain, while the *Shokaku* launched further fighters. It was a different scenario than the sinking of the *Shoho* the previous day, when the weight of numbers the Americans had in the sky was compared with one light cruiser.

The coordination of the American pilots was not as impressive. Torpedoes missed their targets, as did other bombs; only two hits were recorded, causing damage only to the *Shokaku*’s flight deck.\(^{57}\) There were, however, terrific feats in this sortie. Lieutenant John Powers found the target on his raid. Although Powers died on this raid, his 1,000 pound bomb struck the *Shokaku* from a height of only 200 feet.\(^{58}\) This caused aviation gas to ignite, which looked more threatening than it was.\(^{59}\) These two hits on *Shokaku* were far from exceptional for the American forces, due to the number of sorties flown. They prevented the *Shokaku* from being fully operational. The carrier was no longer able to launch any further planes, but only able to land planes on the deck. Many of these planes were transferred to the *Zuikaku*, after another hit was recorded by planes from the *Lexington*, which had finally found the carriers after flying off track earlier in the morning. *Shokaku* was now to end her contribution at the battle and at 1300 made way for home. By this time it was believed by Admiral Takagi that both American carriers had been sunk.\(^{60}\) The *Yorktown* and *Lexington* came under

\(^{57}\) Costello, *The Pacific War*, 258.
\(^{59}\) Ibid.
heavy attack from the Japanese carrier born aircraft. Before the day was out, both sides claimed victory, yet for very different reasons.

The USS *Lexington*, an integral part of the United States Navy, did not survive the Battle of the Coral Sea. Two *Kate* bombers struck her port side with torpedoes at 1120.\(^1\) The attack on the *Lexington* began furiously. While American pilots had been attacking the *Shokaku*, Japanese aircraft attacked the *Lexington*. When the American pilots returned to their vessel, they found that the Japanese had been more successful in their raid, severely damaging the *Lexington*. The reason why the *Lexington* was so badly damaged could, in part, be due to the fact that the aircraft tasked with defending her were unable to effectively carry out their mission. Part of the Combat Air Patrol was too low on fuel to be sent out to intercept the enemy. While failing to find the enemy, pilots failed to gain enough altitude to intercept and were overwhelmed by Zero fighters.\(^2\) The Japanese pilots hurtling in towards the *Lexington* hit it with more precision than the Americans had been able to against the Japanese carriers. Hit in the port bow by two fast running torpedoes, three boiler rooms flooded.

These were not the only hits that the *Lexington* sustained. Two bombs also hit her, although causing only minimal damage. Damage was further caused by near-miss bombs, which shattered plates.\(^3\) The size of the carrier did not allow it to manoeuvre quickly enough to avoid these hits. Despite the best efforts of Captain

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\(^1\) Murfett, *Naval Warfare 1919-1945*, 181.
\(^2\) Costello, *The Pacific War*, 259.
Frederick C. Sherman, the 40,000 tons of steel did not respond in time. After the hits, some of the crew believed they were sinking. Lieutenant C. M. Williams remarked “we thought we were sinking”, as a foot of oil and water was covering a battery on the port side. With the siren screeching the ship began to list 7 degrees to port. The *Lexington* was not the only Allied ship attacked on 8 May. The USS *Yorktown* also came under fire from Japanese aircraft. The *Yorktown* had an advantage over her fellow carrier, though, in that it was smaller and more manoeuvrable.

![Figure 1: *Lexington* being abandoned.](image)

Due to *Yorktown’s* superior agility she was able to dodge many of the torpedoes and bombs which were fired. Only one direct hit was recorded, an 800-pound bomb which struck the flight deck. This bomb penetrated through to the fourth

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64 Quoted In Costello, *The Pacific War*, 259.
66 Costello, *The Pacific War*. 
deck, with sixty-six men killed or injured. As Morison explains, high credit should be given to Captain Buckmaster for his expert handling of the aircraft carrier.\textsuperscript{67} Yorktown was also hurt after Commander Ault, the leader of the dive-bombing strike, was lost at sea. Running low on fuel, with his ship and land out of sight, he radioed Yorktown to keep an eye out for him. His men had successfully disabled the Shokaku, but this was the last time Commander Ault was heard from.

With the Japanese strike group more effective than that of the Americans, the Allies could regard themselves as lucky to have escaped without more damage. This gave them the vital edge they required the following month at Midway. The Yorktown suffered considerable damage on 8 May, but was fixed in time for her to sail to Midway.

Due to the dramatic movements of both the Lexington and the Yorktown, their destroyer and cruiser escorts were not able to maintain their formation. It has been claimed that the Japanese were only after the American carriers, and felt that they had accomplished their mission.\textsuperscript{68} They would soon regret not ensuring that both American carriers sank. The Lexington was overcome by the damage sustained in the morning. Before 1300, after an optimistic outlook that the “Lady Lex” could be saved, she was rocked by a blast from below. The generator had ignited fuel leaking from tanks down below. This blast was fatal; the carrier

\textsuperscript{67} Morison, History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume 4, 55.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 55-6.
which had so proudly served the US Navy was unable to be saved. Captain Sherman was the last to leave, after ice-cream had been scooped into steel helmets and Wags, the captain’s dog, had been transferred to another ship. The destroyer USS *Phelps* was ordered to fire two torpedoes into the *Lexington*, ending her participation in the war.\(^{69}\)

Admiral Yamamoto ordered Takagi to sail deeper into the Coral Sea at midnight on 8 May. They searched unsuccessfully for the Allied fleet for thirty-six hours. As Murfett purports, had these orders been carried out the previous day, the Battle of the Coral Sea could have become a complete disaster for the Allies.\(^ {70}\)

This concluded the first aircraft carrier battle in history. During the battle, the Japanese losses included 77 aircraft, 1074 men and the *Shoho*, a 12,000-ton carrier, while the United States losses included the USS *Lexington*, a 42,000-ton aircraft carrier, 543 men and 66 aircraft. The entire significance of the battle would not necessarily be seen until the following month at Midway. The prevention of the Japanese amphibious attack on Port Moresby was a significant success for the United States and her Allies. It was seen in Australia as a great victory and at least a momentary relief from the fear of an invasion. In terms of a naval battle, victory could be credited to the Imperial Japanese Navy. They were more successful in terms of ships sunk. They were, however, unaware that the *Yorktown* had not been sunk and would participate at Midway. The disabling of


the *Shokaku* proved pivotal over the next month. The Americans rushed the *Yorktown* back to Hawaii for emergency repairs. This was conducted within the astonishingly short time of three days. She was then ready to sail to Midway, which unfortunately proved to be her last action.⁷¹

Chapter 2

Fighting Spirit: The Australian Response

The Battle of the Coral Sea provided a unique opportunity for Allied forces to gain their first victory against the Japanese after a series of devastating and demoralising defeats throughout the Asia-Pacific region. With tensions running high in Australia regarding the possibility of a Japanese invasion, it was vital that the Allied forces provided a new sense of optimism and safety. It was equally important that the Allied governments were able to give their people positive news regarding the war effort. Further battles were to come in the war, which along with the Coral Sea prevented the Japanese succeeding in the Pacific. It was the job of the Australian government to change legislation and send further Australian troops to locations in the Pacific region to capitalise on the achievement in the Coral Sea. It can be argued that some of these changes may not have been necessary if the Battle of the Coral Sea was the sole source of Australia’s security in 1942 and for the remainder of the war.

Regardless of any Japanese intentions, it must be recognised that Australia was in a dire situation in 1942. In regard to the security of Australia, it can be argued that an invasion may not have been necessary for the Japanese to remove Australia’s presence from the war and inflict further problems on the United States. If Operation MO had been a Japanese success, they would have been able to control the shipping lanes in the Southern Asia and South Pacific areas, effectively
cutting the communication and supply lines between Australia and the US, nullifying the use of Australian bases by the US military. It can be seen with hindsight that the Battle of the Coral Sea was not the battle that saved Australia from an invasion, which may have initially been believed, nor did it stop the attacks against the Australian mainland.\(^7^2\) However, it can be argued that the battle did stem the flow of the war, enabling the Allies to gain control in the Pacific and in turn save not only Australia, but possibly the United States from a humiliating defeat.

The Australian Government was in a difficult position in 1942, with the bulk of Australia’s military personnel fighting overseas with British forces. It was the job of the Prime Minister, John Curtin, to ensure that the strategic victory in the Coral Sea was used to the fullest. This was done through many policies and decisions made in the aftermath of the battle.

In May 1942, John Curtin gained the public’s attention by stating that a “great naval battle is proceeding in the South-west Pacific zone”\(^7^3\). Prime Minister Curtin went on to say in his famous speech that “this battle will not decide the war; it will determine the immediate tactics which will be pursued by the Allied forces and by the common enemy”\(^7^4\). Curtin was right; this battle did not solely decide the war, as no one battle can, nor did it decide the fate of Australia. It was,

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\(^7^4\) Ibid.
however, a considerable stepping stone to the eventual downfall of Japan. The US Navy was required to consolidate the gains acquired in the Coral Sea by defeating the Japanese at Midway the following month. If Midway had not been a success, the success achieved by the men who fought in the Coral Sea may well have been negated.

Curtin’s news about a battle taking place in the Coral Sea was delivered in a speech to Parliament on Friday, 8 May 1942, the last day of the battle which had begun four days earlier. The Battle of the Coral Sea enabled the Australian government to reassure the Australian people and motivate them to keep fighting, whether they were currently serving as troops or contributing to the war effort on the home front. The future now looked brighter. It has been reported that Curtin exaggerated the possibility of a Japanese invasion. Nevertheless, Curtin’s stance may have been necessary to keep the Australian people from becoming complacent. Curtin had struggled with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill over the return of Australian troops to support the defence of Australia. It may be argued that Curtin used all possible initiatives to ensure there would be enough men to secure the nation should Japan launch an invasion attempt.

Curtin maintained that the danger to Australia would not be over until the Japanese Imperial Forces had been completely defeated. As reported in the *Barrier Miner* on 24 July 1942, “The menace to Australia is constant. It will not

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disappear until the Japs have been defeated”. From statements such as this it can be seen that the government did not view the Battle of the Coral Sea as the end of Japanese aggression nor did they perceive that there was no longer a Japanese threat to the Australian mainland. After a series of Japanese advances in South-East Asia and the Pacific it was decided that Australian troops would now be sent overseas to once again counter the Japanese threat.

This decision was based just as much on events that had taken place earlier in the Pacific as on the need for continued defence after the Battle of the Coral Sea. Earlier in 1942, with Asia and the Pacific under severe threat from Japan, the future of Australia looked bleak. The British had lost Singapore, and two of their most powerful vessels in the navy, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, had been sunk in Asian waters. Following the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Australia had turned to America for defence. Britain was tied up in Europe fighting Nazi Germany and was reluctant to move further military assets to the Asian region. With the Americans now involved in the war, Prime Minister Curtin gave one of the most famous speeches in Australian history. He stated, “Without any inhibitions of any kind I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free from any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom”. Australia needed help defending itself from the rapidly advancing Japanese; the United States was to provide this support.

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Even before Japan entered the war, their aggression in the Pacific began to alarm the Australian government. At the beginning of December 1941, the War Cabinet held a meeting regarding the belligerence of Japan, which was a growing concern.\textsuperscript{79} In the coming months the Dutch East Indies, Singapore and other islands became property of the Japanese. Only Papua New Guinea was left for the Allies to defend before Australia looked to become Japan’s next victim. HMAS \textit{Perth} and USS \textit{Houston} were sunk in the Battle of the Sunda Strait in February 1942, leaving Australia more vulnerable to attack. Earlier that month Darwin had already felt the brunt of Japanese aircraft. The Australian Government had the tough job of rallying the Australian people to fight, whether by joining the military or helping in the war effort at home. According to Black and Wallace, “as the months went by Curtin’s task increasingly became one of sustaining the total war effort in the face of ‘growing public complacency’”.\textsuperscript{80} The Battle of the Coral Sea produced an opportunity for the government to encourage the Australian people after such a bleak opening to 1942.

The victory in the Coral Sea was not enough. Two months after the Battle of the Coral Sea, the invasion of Papua New Guinea meant that all Australians were required to continue working hard to ensure that the Japanese were not able to accomplish their mission of capturing Port Moresby, this time by land. Prime Minister Curtin then went on to say, “we have had breathing space, and that is all we could have expected”, referring to the battles that took place in the Coral Sea.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, 20.  
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid, 22.
and at Midway.81 Curtin also reiterated that war was an ongoing struggle and would not be resolved until Japan had been completely defeated.82 The Battle of the Coral Sea did not stop the Japanese advance, nor did it deter them from trying once again to take Port Moresby. It did, however, signal the beginning of the end for them and provide the Australian government and the Australian people with some confidence. Due to the success of the US Navy at Midway the following month, they now gained the naval ascendancy in the Pacific. Although it would still take three years for the Japanese to be completely defeated, there was a new sense of optimism throughout the Allied nations. This optimism now needed to be consolidated.

In contrast to this optimism, the Advisory War Council had been disappointed that Japanese losses in the Coral Sea had not been more significant. They also expressed their dissatisfaction that more land-based aircraft were not stationed in north-east Australia.83 These views went against those of General MacArthur, who believed the efforts of the Allies had produced a more than satisfactory result. It is arguable that little more could have been achieved in the Coral Sea, and with hindsight the quick-fire successes at the Coral Sea and Midway allowed the Allies to build confidence.

In July 1942, there was yet another attempt by the Japanese to take Port Moresby, this time by land. If the Battle of the Coral Sea had in fact saved Australia as it has

81 Quoted in: “Curtin’s Grave Warning On Menace to Australia; Our War For Survival.”
82 Ibid.
been claimed, these battles and the troop numbers sent may not have been necessary. This suggests that the impact of the Coral Sea action and the relief it initiated within Australia was only felt for a short period.

MacArthur felt that Britain’s decision to only offer assistance to Australia if under heavy attack was not acceptable, and asked Prime Minister Curtin to make provisions for the return of the 9th Division. Sydney had come under attack from midget submarines on 31 May.84 It now became evident that Japan was not contemplating a reduction in their attacks against the Australian mainland.

In spite of continued Japanese threats, the Battle of the Coral Sea acted as the catalyst for a series of victories throughout the Pacific, including Guadalcanal, one of the war’s most famous campaigns. After months of disastrous campaigns, the Allies were now capable of launching offensive attacks against the Japanese. It was reported in Washington on 8 May that the policy of taking an offensive strategy against Japan had now become a reality.85 It was not until September 1943 that John Curtin announced that the threat of invasion had passed. He emphasized that it was still vital to fight, as victory was now in sight.86 It had become necessary to press home the advantage that the Allies were beginning to secure in the Pacific.

84 Ibid, 119.
By 1943, as the Allies were starting to gain further control in the Pacific, it became evident that the major battles were taking place in areas further from the Australian mainland. The Australian government introduced changes to the laws surrounding conscription. For the first time conscripted men would be legally allowed to fight overseas, although in a limited area. Curtin believed that these troops should be able to be sent overseas to counter the Japanese. It was possible for Curtin to implement this change to the Defence Act, but he decided against this. It went to Parliament for debate. There was little opposition to the proposed decision. Subsequently, the Defence Act of 1943 was approved by the War Cabinet.\(^{87}\) This stated that Australian conscripts could now fight in the South-West Pacific Zone for the remainder of the war. The Act would cease six months following the end of any hostilities.\(^{88}\)

Curtin, when in the opposition party at the outbreak of war, had expressed his disapproval of conscripting men to fight overseas. These views changed as Australia received little assistance from Britain, who used many Australian service personnel in the fight against the Axis Powers in the Middle East and North Africa. On 29 April 1942, with Curtin now in power, the opposition leader, Mr Fadden stated that:

> in the order that the Australian Imperial Force and the Australian Military Forces may be effectively welded into one fighting army available for offence as well as defence, this House is of opinion that all territorial limitations upon

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the power of the Commonwealth Government to employ the Australian Military Forces should be removed. 89

David Day reports that in early 1942 Britain assumed that the cities of Darwin and Perth would be invaded by Japanese troops. They did not feel the need to send any personnel to increase security as they did not believe that the south-east seaboard, home to the major cities of Sydney and Melbourne, was in any danger. 90 In the following months, the Battle of the Coral Sea appeared to nullify any immediate threats of an invasion of Northern Australia. However, the fear of air raids remained for the foreseeable future. 91 The fear of Japanese invasion in 1942 was also felt in the southern portions of Australia. According to one account, explosives and depth charges were rigged in Fremantle Harbour to prevent its use by the Japanese in the event of an invasion. 92

From this, it can be seen that Curtin was in the unenviable position of sending troops overseas to increase the defensive perimeter, while also pushing the Japanese back in an offensive thrust. Many restrictions were introduced in Australia, as in many other nations throughout the war, such as censorship to

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prevent widespread panic, rationing and the encouragement of civilians to join
volunteer organisations helping the war effort.\textsuperscript{93}

In the event of invasion, a plan to allow the Japanese to occupy the northern parts
of Australia, while only defending the south eastern part of Australia where the
majority of the population and industry was located, has become known as the
Brisbane Line. The validity of any such plan may have come under scrutiny if
indeed it was implemented. As Lord Strabolgi, Royal Navy, notes, if the Japanese
had invaded Australia, the vast desert separating northern and southern Australia
may have prevented them wanting to progress south. Instead they might have
been inclined to defend their northern occupation at places such as Darwin. Along
with any occupation they may have had in New Guinea, this would have been
able to prevent the northern passage to the Indian Ocean being accessed by the
Allies.\textsuperscript{94} In this case, the Brisbane Line would have been ineffective. The main
cities may have remained safe, but little would have been accomplished from
such a position. The Japanese would have been able to control the Arafura Sea
and prevent any supply between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

As the Brisbane Line has never been confirmed as official policy, it is the topic of
much debate in Australia. The Government felt that the most important areas to
secure were those with the majority of industry and population.\textsuperscript{95} With the

\textsuperscript{93} Australian War Memorial, \textit{Australia Under Attack 1942-1943} “Mobilising the nation”,
\textsuperscript{94} Lord Stragbolgi R.N, \textit{Singapore and After: A Study Of The Pacific Campaign}, (Watford: Taylor Garnett &
Co. Ltd, 1942), 117.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{The Brisbane Line} (Learning Essentials, 1985), Videocassette (VHS).
defence capabilities of many northern cities including Darwin and Cairns, much
was left to the Volunteer Defence Corp which was tasked with disrupting any
Japanese troops in the event of an invasion. The government requested that much
of the population in Northern Australia move south as the fear of invasion grew.96

Following the Allied success in the Coral Sea in preventing the seaborne invasion,
the Japanese attempted to access Port Moresby by heading south through Papua
New Guinea. In July 1942, Australian forces were then sent to defend the island.
What ensued was the famous battle along the Kokoda track. From events such as
this it can be seen that the Battle of the Coral Sea was an important milestone in
the Pacific campaign. However, it was not decisive in stopping Japanese
aggression, nor did it completely negate the threat to Australia. The Australian
government was still required to introduce conscription and other measures to
ensure the safety of Australia.

Any plans which the Japanese had for an invasion of Australia were thwarted, at
least temporarily, by the defeats suffered in the Coral Sea and at Midway.
However, Japanese personnel did, in fact, land on Australian soil. Suzuhko
Mizumo spent two days on the Northern Australian mainland in 1944.97 The
importance of the Battle of the Coral Sea can now be seen, after maps of Australia
indicating particular routes, water storage areas and other knowledge were found
in Tokyo after the war’s end.98 Government plans such as the Brisbane Line may

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96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
well have been needed if the Battle of the Coral Sea was not a success. As stated earlier, if the Japanese were able to capture Port Moresby and control the shipping lanes to the north of Australia, they would have been able to conduct considerably more air-raids on the mainland and possibly launch an invasion attempt.

The Battle of the Coral Sea proved to be the catalyst that the Allies needed to gain ascendancy in the Pacific. However, this ascendancy would not have been possible if not for particular decisions made by the government following the end of the battle. Some of these decisions were directly or indirectly enacted due to the outcome of the battle. The sending of troops to the Kokoda track to fight off the Japanese land advance was due to the success of the Coral Sea. The success acquired by the Allied navies was now required to be sustained by the army. The introduction of conscription may not have been necessary if the battle had completely saved Australia, but there is no doubt that the battle played a large part in the eventual success of the Allies. As Prime Minister Curtin expressed months after, in the immediate aftermath it simply provided breathing space from a relentless few months in the Pacific which had seen the Japanese advance at a rapid pace. It was now his job to rally the Australian people after an event which provided good news.
Chapter 3  

Midway: The End of the Beginning

The Battle of Midway is said to be the greatest naval battle of the Second World War. This battle eventuated one month after the Allied strategic victory in the Coral Sea. Fought between 4 and 7 June 1942, Midway delivered a decisive victory to the American fleet. Midway consolidated the supremacy of the aircraft carrier in the Pacific, a battle tactic first initiated during the engagement in the Coral Sea. The battle also changed the strategic dynamic of the Pacific campaign. The Allies were now able to fully achieve their objective of taking the offensive.

In 1953, the Townsville Daily Bulletin suggested that the Battle of Midway was undoubtedly the Pacific War’s turning point, a turning point which began in the Coral Sea. The battle in the “Coral Sea was the end of the beginning Midway was the beginning of the end.” However, recently, some commentators have purported that Midway was not the turning point of the Pacific campaign, but rather one episode in a series of events. It was important for the Allies not only to consolidate their good result at the Coral Sea but also to provide a foundation for the remainder of the war. It can be argued that the combined victories of the Coral Sea and Midway enabled the Allies to force a change in the direction of the

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99 Thomas F. Horton, The Battle of Midway, DVD, (Lifetime Distributors).
Pacific War. For this reason, it can be seen that the battles, combined, were significant not just to the defence of Australia but to the overall defence of the Pacific region.

The battles of the Coral Sea and Midway can be considered in a combined sense, as the Battle of the Coral Sea was somewhat of an unfinished battle, with neither side choosing to continue the fight until an outright victory was decided. Due to this, at least from a common observance, Midway has overshadowed the Coral Sea due to its decisive nature. However, it can be argued that Midway should be considered as a continuation of the Coral Sea. With these battles combined, they ultimately decided the security of Australia and turned the tide of the Pacific war in favour of the Allies.

The Battle of Midway eventuated from a Japanese attempt to capture Midway Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. The Japanese intended to invade the strategic Pacific outpost, drawing in the US Pacific fleet, where Japanese carriers, lying in wait, would deliver a conclusive blow. US code breakers had intercepted Japanese messages which indicated that an invasion force was being sent to the Aleutian Islands and also to another location, assumed to be Midway. The intentions of the Japanese to take Midway were made known when a bogus, un-coded US transmission was sent from Midway saying that their ability to produce fresh drinking water had been diminished. A Japanese transmission was then
intercepted noting that invading troops should make extra provisions for drinking water.\textsuperscript{102}

Once the Japanese intentions were obvious, the American fleet was able to reverse the plan of a Japanese ambush. The Americans were also able to further count on what can only be referred to as luck once they were in position off the coast of Midway. Scouting planes were sent out from Japanese carriers to search for any Allied warships in the area. The Japanese scouting plane which was assigned to search the position where the American fleet was lying in wait suffered mechanical problems for twenty minutes, allowing the US Navy further time to prepare their ambush. As the battle progressed, the Japanese suffered a devastating defeat in which their four carriers present were sunk. The Americans lost the \textit{Yorktown}, which had been rapidly repaired after being damaged in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

The Midway atoll was a small but significant piece of real estate. It stood, as its name suggests, in the middle of the Pacific. Whoever controlled this atoll might ultimately hold the balance of power in the Pacific Ocean. If the Japanese had been able to capture it, they would have had an uninterrupted run to Hawaii, especially if the US Pacific Fleet had been destroyed or significantly damaged. The US would have found it very difficult to force their way back into contention for victory. It would have been possible for the Japanese to set up a defensive system across the Western Pacific, which would have allowed invasion of several

islands, as well as the isolation of Australia.\textsuperscript{103} Although Midway lay thousands of miles away, its position was indeed significant for the ultimate security of Australia.

The United States had three carriers present at Midway: \textit{Enterprise}, \textit{Hornet} and \textit{Yorktown}. These were all pivotal in the action against the Japanese carrier force. The \textit{Akagi}, \textit{Kaga}, \textit{Hiryu} and \textit{Soryu} were the fundamental part of the IJNs force headed to Midway, accompanied by a vast array of cruisers and destroyers.\textsuperscript{104} The Japanese had a formidable force. These forces were, however, not a match for the signals intelligence of the Americans which gave them the upper hand in the battle. The skill of the American aviators allowed them to capitalise on this. Amidst the damage and carnage, the engagement would be known as a battle which changed the course of history.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, 140.
\textsuperscript{105} Thomas F. Horton, \textit{Search For The Japanese Fleet}, DVD (Discovery Channel, 2000)
The Battle of Midway, although one of the most famous battles in history, as
Willmott discusses, was a battle which cannot stand separate from that of the
Coral Sea and Guadalcanal which also affected the outcome of the Pacific War.
Although Willmott does not see any individual battle being decisive in the Pacific
campaign, he does note that “the Coral Sea was the type of battle the Japanese
had to win quickly, decisively and at small cost to themselves if they were to
avoid ultimate defeat”. 107 Midway, on the other hand, was a battle which
transformed the United States from a power in the Pacific to the major power of
the Pacific. It must therefore be considered that ultimately these battles worked in

tandem to win the war for the Allies. It can be argued that the safety of Australia was initially gained after the Battle of the Coral Sea, but was then all but assured following the Battle of Midway when the Americans gained the naval ascendancy in the Pacific for the Allies.

While the Second World War was still in progress in June 1943, a statement in *The Cairns Post* presented the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway as engagements that shaped the course of Australia’s destiny.

In those days the course of our destiny was shaped. The political mind has told us that the battle of the Coral Sea delivered us from the enemy, and that, by the decisive victory at Midway Island, we gained control of the South Pacific waters.\(^{108}\)

It is important to note that the combined effectiveness of these battles was not unknown to the Australian wartime population.

The Battle of Midway and Coral Sea have been linked together as equally important by authors such as Willmott as well in newspaper articles such as that of the *Cairns Post* and *The Courier-Mail*.\(^{109}\) As discussed, both battles needed to be won by the same side for the battles to be considered significant. It has been argued that if the Japanese were able to take Port Moresby, it would have meant nothing if they were not successful at Midway the following month.\(^{110}\) Whilst it

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\(^{110}\) “Stopping Japan.” *The Cairns Post*.


was publically reported in June 1942 that both battles had defined the forecast of the war, it was also noted that, “for Australia they mean that the threat of invasion has been removed for months at least”.¹¹¹

If following the strategic success they had in the Coral Sea the US had not consolidated at Midway it would have been considered a missed chance to gain control of the Pacific. There can therefore be little doubt that whoever achieved ascendancy in the Coral Sea would also have to achieve victory at Midway. As a result of the success that the Allies had in preventing Port Moresby being captured, and the prevention of the possible isolation or invasion of Australia, the Coral Sea was indeed a strategically vital battle to win. The Battle of Midway was a continuation of this and essential for sustained security.

At Midway, the Japanese fleet had suffered the greatest defeat in its history.¹¹² The loss of four fleet carriers proved decisive as the war continued. The Japanese, following six months of unstoppable victories throughout the Pacific, had finally been halted at the Coral Sea. With defeat at Midway, the Japanese faced a huge task to regain control of the Pacific. This proved to be impossible as the Allies soon began to secure further victories. Although Coral Sea was not a definitive and outright victory for the Allies, the strategic victory they achieved was much more impressive than the tactical victory of the Japanese in the context of the war. This would only become evident following Midway.

The Japanese arguably did not have a long-term strategic plan for the war.\textsuperscript{113} This lack of foresight may have cost the Japanese dearly. Their peak of power perhaps came too early, while the US were still on the rise. Rear Admiral Matome Ugaki noted in his diary at the beginning of 1942 that “the course of events during this year will determine the fate of the war”.\textsuperscript{114} The battles which took place certainly did determine the fate of the war. The loss of four carriers in one battle can be regarded as nothing less than disastrous.

With success later in the year at Guadalcanal and the prevention of the Japanese reaching Port Moresby by land, it became evident that any major threat posed to Australia was all but gone. However, even before Guadalcanal or the Kokoda campaign began, The Argus of Melbourne reported on 15 June 1942, the Navy Department’s statement that the Coral Sea engagement prevented Australia from either being invaded or isolated. It also noted that the Coral Sea allowed Australia and other Pacific Islands to strengthen their bases.\textsuperscript{115} In contrast to this, just three days earlier, The Canberra Times reported that the “worst period of the war” was about to begin. The Minister for the Army, Mr Forde, believed that the Japanese would not accept the defeats at Midway and the Coral Sea, and would launch further attacks for which Australia must be prepared.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{113} Healy, Midway 1942, 9.
\textsuperscript{114} Quoted in Ibid
Bateson has argued that the Coral Sea should not be seen as a tactical victory to the Japanese, but rather a tactical draw, while it was unquestionably a strategic victory for the Allies.\textsuperscript{117} This may have in turn had a psychological effect on the Japanese who “threw away one of their greatest opportunities of the Pacific war” when they failed to continue with their amphibious invasion attempt of Port Moresby.\textsuperscript{118} The failure of the Japanese to successfully achieve their ambition of capturing Port Moresby in May 1942 undoubtedly led to their downfall. If indeed it was a draw at the Coral Sea, then this gave all the more expectation that Midway would become the pivotal moment in the Pacific War.

At Midway, the “combination of intelligence, tactics, courage and sacrifice forever changed the course of the war and world history”.\textsuperscript{119} As this statement suggests, Midway has in some respects overshadowed the confrontation in the Coral Sea. It must, however, be asserted that without the Coral Sea being a strategic success for the Allies, Midway may have turned out differently. If the Yorktown had been sunk, rather than damaged, it would have affected the American firepower the following month, possibly handing the Japanese the victory which they craved.

The Battle of the Coral Sea had a profound impact on the Japanese preparedness for their planned attack on Midway. The policy, which was inherent in the

\textsuperscript{117} Bateson, \textit{The War With Japan}, 164-165.
\textsuperscript{118} Quoted In Ibid, 165.
Japanese Navy, was to always use their best pilots on operations, rather than sending a portion of them to work as instructors to teach the next generation. The pilot losses suffered by the Japanese at the Battle of the Coral Sea left vacant positions which could not be filled by combat-ready pilots with sufficient training. This policy severely hindered their chances of victory at Midway, with the Zuikaku being unavailable because of a lack of competent pilots being attached to the ship.\(^\text{120}\) The lack of further carrier power for the Japanese proved critical.

Former Admiral in the Imperial Japanese Navy, Nobutake Kondo, wrote in 1951 that there was no doubt that the Battle of Midway proved to be a turning point in the Pacific War.\(^\text{121}\) The failure of the Japanese to succeed in the Coral Sea and at Midway can be attributed to good intelligence on behalf of the Allies as well as mistakes on the part of the Japanese. Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton has noted that “If it had not been for radio intelligence, the first we would have heard about the Coral Sea probably would have been a victory announcement by the Tokyo Domei news agency”.\(^\text{122}\) It has also been claimed that the Japanese practised manoeuvres that they intended to use at Midway during the battle of the Coral Sea. This has been attributed to arrogance by the Japanese, who had become overconfident in their operations.\(^\text{123}\) Had the Japanese been more focused on their current situation at Coral Sea, they may well have succeeded in their mission to


\(^{123}\) Ibid, 406.
capture Port Moresby, which could have possibly changed the outcome at Midway and the dynamic of the war.

The Battle of the Coral Sea provided some assurance that the Japanese were not undefeatable. Mark Grimsley has argued that at the Battle of the Coral Sea, tactical errors cost the Japanese heavily. If indeed they had successfully captured Port Moresby, they would have been able to strengthen their defensive perimeter, and launch attacks against bases in Northern Australia. It would have also allowed the Japanese to have further assets in the area for future Allied offensive campaigns such as Guadalcanal.\footnote{Mark Grimsley, “…The Japanese had won the battle of the Coral Sea?” \textit{World War II} 22.10 (March 2008), 85-87 http://0-find.galegroup.com.prospero.murdoch.edu.au/goto/retrieve?contentSet=IAC-Documents&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2CUS%2C%29%26AFOE%3D%28vol%2CNone%2C%29%26sp%2CNone%2C%29%26da%2CNone%2C%29%26pu%2CNone%2C%29%26World+War+II%24&sgHitCountType=None&inPS=true&sort=DateDescend&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&tabID=T003&prodId=AONE&searchId=R1&currentPosition=1&userGroupName=mu rdoch&docId=A214997795&docType=IAC (accessed 24 September 2011)}

Geoffrey Till has noted that “Midway was not the turning point of the war in the Pacific that many deem it to be. Rather, it was an inspiring symbol of a decisive campaign”.\footnote{Geoffrey Till, “ Midway: The Decisive Battle?”} Three battles in 1942 signified the changing tide of the war: Coral Sea, Midway and Guadalcanal. Till regards these three battles as a combined campaign of which Midway has become an inspiring representation.\footnote{Ibid.} Throughout 1942, the Allies were able to gain dominance in the Pacific, however, it was not clear cut. Total victory did not come until August 1945. As the Allies moved closer to Japan some of the deadliest battles of World War Two occurred,
including Okinawa which cost 12,000 American lives and over 100,000 Japanese lives.\textsuperscript{127}

On 8 December 1941, the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, noted in his Joint Address to Congress that “with confidence in our armed forces- with the unbounding determination of our people- we will gain the inevitable triumph”.\textsuperscript{128} This triumph looked a distant aspiration in early 1942. The battles at Coral Sea and Midway as combined actions, however, looked to change the course of the war to a triumph. The early portion of 1942 was a dark period for the Allies, “then came a ray of light for the Allies out of the Coral Sea, dawn broke over Midway”.\textsuperscript{129} This statement suggests that the two battles have a close relationship. This pushed the Japanese into a defensive role which was unexpected for them following their early successes in the region.

If Midway was captured by the Japanese, it would have enabled the entire Western Pacific region to be under their control. The isolation of Australia would be a very real possibility, and the return to the Philippines by the US would have been in serious doubt. Depending on the damage that the United States suffered at Midway, it would have allowed the Japanese to negotiate a peace deal on their

\textsuperscript{129}Samuel E. Morison, The Two Ocean War, (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1963), 137.
terms.\textsuperscript{130} For this reason it could be concluded that the Battle of Midway was significant in its own right. Defeat in the battle would have had a detrimental effect on not only the assets of the American military, limiting their ability to immediately launch a counter-attack, but also the morale of the Allies as a whole.

The battles at Midway and the Coral Sea were two of the battles which set the southern limit of naval expansion of the Japanese.\textsuperscript{131} February 1943 looked to be a safe period for Australia, with both the Coral Sea and Midway being well in the past. However, Captain John Collins, the former commander of HMAS \textit{Sydney}, believed that Australia was still vulnerable to an invasion. Collins was quoted in \textit{The Courier-Mail} saying “I don’t think Australia is yet completely removed from the possibility of invasion”. Collins also noted that defence against any new thrusts that might be launched against Australia must be prepared for.\textsuperscript{132}

Peter Stanley contends that there was no Battle for Australia. Stanley purports that there was no threat of Japanese invasion as a result of the success of the Allies in 1942. Stanley, however, does concede that if these battles had come to a different conclusion, Australia may have come under Japanese threat.\textsuperscript{133} In contrast, Bob Wurth has noted that the Japanese threat to Australia was still ever


present following the victories at Midway and along the Kokoda track.\textsuperscript{134} Bombing raids were still carried out on the Australian mainland. The bombing of towns in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland continued well into 1943.\textsuperscript{135} If the bombings are used as a measure of the success of the battles in the Coral Sea and at Midway, then the battles could be seen as unsuccessful. The last bombing raid on Australia was conducted against Darwin in November 1943, well over a year after the victories of the US aircraft carriers.\textsuperscript{136}

The battles of the Coral Sea and Midway will go down in history as the time in which the aircraft carrier became supreme in war at sea. Apart from this new way to fight at sea, the battles served as significant moments in the Pacific war. The failure of the Japanese to secure outright victory in the Coral Sea was compounded by their comprehensive defeat at Midway. This was pivotal in the outcome of the Pacific War. The Allies prevented the Japanese from reaching Port Moresby during Operation MO and the US victory at Midway changed the direction of the war. It has become evident that the battles did not stop the air raids on the Australian mainland, but they did drive the Japanese further away from achieving their ultimate goal of controlling the Pacific and Southern Asia. There was no invasion or isolation of Australia.

\textsuperscript{134} Bob Wurth, \textit{Australia’s Greatest Peril: 1942}, (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2010), 302.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
In the context of the Pacific War, and the ultimate security of Australia, these two battles played a fundamental role. While the Coral Sea provided immediate security from threat of invasion or isolation, further battles against the Japanese were needed to insure that this would continue and this occurred at Midway. These battles should be seen in a combined sense, with the Coral Sea acting as a stepping stone to ultimate victory in the Pacific. However, it could also be said that the Battle of the Coral Sea loses some significance when directly compared with Midway. Nonetheless, both battles must be seen in conjunction with one another to appreciate their significance in the overall Pacific War. Despite Midway having overshadowed the Coral Sea in the time since, Midway completed the groundwork which the Allies began during their action against the Japanese Port Moresby invasion force.
Chapter 4

Commemoration: Remembering the Sacrifice

The Battle of the Coral Sea, fought sixty-nine years ago has become a pivotal part of Australian and American military history. In the early stages of the Pacific War, the Japanese had been virtually unstoppable. The American and Australian naval forces present in the Coral Sea were able to force the Japanese back from their objective at Port Moresby. Subsequently, the Battle of the Coral Sea was dubbed the battle that saved Australia. This claim, although arguably referring to safety from invasion, can also be seen as safety from isolation, which Australia would have suffered if the Japanese had been successful in their mission. It might, therefore, be assumed that a battle of such purported significance as this would be commemorated in an equally proportionate way. In the postwar years, this battle has been commemorated in numerous ways: from annual services in several Australian cities to memorial parks built in its honour to publications being dedicated specifically to the battle. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the memorialisation of the Battle of the Coral Sea, especially in recent years, has not been consistent with its initial perceived significance.

Michael Keren asserts that while commemoration of war is important, “the ranks of those who hold memories of the war shrink, and while a new generation of youngsters comes on stage, often disinterested in its elders’ war stories”. War,
therefore, may not be commemorated to everyone’s satisfaction.\textsuperscript{137} There are many forms of war commemoration, including ceremonies, monuments, art, film and literature. These forms of memorialisation vary with time, popular culture and the collective memory of society.\textsuperscript{138}

Over the years the Battle of the Coral Sea has been commemorated in a number of locations and by several high ranking military and government officials from both the United States and Australia. In his letter to the Australian people regarding the commemoration of the battle in 2010, US President Barack Obama claimed that the “Battle holds a unique place in history of both our nations”.\textsuperscript{139} The President asserted in 2011 that we should honour the sacrifice of those who perished and for the loss we shared at sea.\textsuperscript{140}

It is evident that the battle, which played a vital role in the prevention of Japanese extension throughout the Pacific in the early stages of the war, has had an impact on both nations. At the 69-year anniversary service in Canberra, US Ambassador to Australia, Jeffrey L. Bleich, noted that in 1942 Australia was on the brink of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid, 3.  
\end{flushright}
Japanese invasion. Consequently the battle was of the utmost importance; it was “a battle that changed the course of history”.141

Australia’s former Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Russ Crane, has noted that the battle was the main factor causing the Japanese to reconsider their campaign to take Port Moresby by sea.142 This campaign, which would eventually be shifted to a land assault later in 1942, could have had a detrimental impact on the Australian mainland. The Australian people felt a sense of relief and liberation at the knowledge of the Japanese being turned back for the first time in the war. It would appear that both the US and Australia view this battle as an historical turning point.

Veterans of the battle believe it should indeed be remembered and commemorated as a major turning point in the war.143 The ability of the Allied naval forces to repel the Japanese advance had a major impact on the Australian population, whether realised at the time or not. It may indeed be impossible to gauge the impact that a Japanese victory in the Coral Sea would have had on the Australian people, however, it certainly would not have been favorable. There may never have been a full-scale invasion carried out on the Australian mainland.

If Australia was cut off from American supply and support, it may have had a very similar impact to an invasion. It would have been much the same as the impact the British would have suffered if the Kriegsmarine had been successful in preventing all supply ships from reaching Britain across the Atlantic.

The way in which the Battle of the Coral Sea has been commemorated indicates that the battle has a rich history in Australia. Even so, other events in the Pacific, such as the Battle of Midway, may be of greater historical importance to the United States. This is understandable, since the Midway engagement was considered a decisive action in which it became clear that the Allies were able to take the offensive in the war for the Pacific. The Battle of Midway has been commemorated more by the US than the Battle of the Coral Sea. Commemoration ceremonies are held in the US to mark the anniversary of the Battle of Midway, such as that which was held in Washington in June 2011.\(^\text{144}\)

In 1942, it is likely that the relief that the Australians felt at the quelling of the Japanese advance was immeasurable. It must be noted, however, that the Battle of the Coral Sea alone did not save Australia. This is reflected in the memorialisation of other battles. The Battle of the Coral Sea, in terms of commemoration, has often been overshadowed by battles such as those which took place along the Kokoda track. These are more popularly known within the

\(^{144}\) The United States Navy Memorial, “Battle of Midway Commemoration Ceremony”

community. This battle began after the failed amphibious assault and also had a role in maintaining the security of Australia. It is likely that the Australian people feel a greater need to commemorate a battle which only involved Australian troops, rather than an Allied effort. Encounters such as Kokoda have also become popular because people, even today, can experience some facets of the battle by walking the track. However, it can also be said that Australians remember the sacrifice of the Americans at the Coral Sea, as the commemoration of the Coral Sea serves as a reminder of America’s contribution to the defence of Australia.¹⁴⁵

Naval historian Dr David Stevens suggests that the Coral Sea battle should be “remembered by everyone because in reality it should be up there with Gallipoli and Kokoda”.¹⁴⁶ This sentiment is also shared by veteran Tommy Simms, who stated, “looking back I don’t think I have done anything ever any more important than the Coral Sea Battle”.¹⁴⁷ It is evident that the battle does hold a special place in the history of Australia, regardless of its lower profile compared to other military engagements.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.
The commemoration of the battle each year, with a large American presence of government and military personnel in Australia, is evidence that Australians today still strongly recognise the role of the American forces in the defence of Australia. Vice Admiral Crane noted that “We continue to remember and honour their sacrifice today as a turning point in the war and in our relationship with the United States. As Australians, we remain grateful for the Americans who came to our aid with whom we fought as one”.\textsuperscript{148}

As a result of this relationship, the Australian-American Association has become a prevalent force of social interaction for the two nations. Although formed before the war in 1936, it has only become prevalent in the years since. It has served to encourage relations between the two nations. The Association encourages the commemoration of the Battle of the Coral Sea among other activities.\textsuperscript{149} The Association should be noted as an integral part of US-Australian relations, especially in regards to remembrance of wars which both nations have shared. As it stands, memorial services for the Coral Sea are held annually in major Australian capital cities and are hosted by the Australian-American Association. Collectively this shows both nations still remember the sacrifice by sailors and airmen in the Coral Sea.

\textsuperscript{148} Royal Australian Navy, “69th Anniversary of the climax of the Battle of the Coral Sea”
During the Anzac Day commemorations in 2002, Robert Bowen Ault marched in honour of his father, a naval aviator killed during the Battle of the Coral Sea. He noted that “the people of Australia have never forgotten that the United States came to their defense at a critical time early in the war”. The commemoration around Australia in 2011, involving both Australian and US personnel, shows that both nations are committed to remembering those who fought and died in the battle. Today, both nations also share a close bond which was forged during the Pacific campaign, especially the Coral Sea, when the US came to Australia’s aid. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard has acknowledged this relationship: “to

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150 Royal Australian Navy, “69th Anniversary of the climax of the Battle of the Coral Sea”
remember that in our darkest days we have been glad to see each other’s face and hear each other’s voice. In our days together under attack in the Pacific.” 152

It can be argued that if the Battle of the Coral Sea was truly the battle which saved Australia, the commemoration and the public acknowledgment of the battle should be greater. In recent years Anzac Day dawn services have gained popularity.153 With the Gallipoli campaign often credited with being the birth of Australia, this is understandable. Anzac Day has grown to incorporate much more than just the Gallipoli campaign. It could be argued that a perceived lack of commemoration of other battles is due to Australia having a history of many meaningful and pivotal battles, and all are commemorated collectively.

In Cardwell, Queensland, the Coral Sea Battle Memorial Park was opened in 1984. The memorial pays tribute to the battle which it reports as saving Australia. A whole park being dedicated as a memorial, rather than a single plaque or monument, is noteworthy. What is also notable is the location. The battle holds a special place in the history of Australia, but especially that of Queensland. The north east was the closest Australian territory to the action, and the potential location for a Japanese invasion. The main plaque at the Cardwell memorial is inscribed: “This Park commemorates the Coral Sea Battle during World War II when American and Allied Forces defeated the Japanese in an air

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and sea battle to save Australia. It is also a lasting memorial to those who lost their lives defending this nation”.  

The memorial in Cardwell also acknowledges the “ship and crew of the United States Aircraft Carrier USS Lexington”.  

The main site of Australian war commemoration is the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Initially its two aims were commemoration and understanding. Often the aim of war memorials is to allow people to grieve for those who did not return home. For Australia during both World Wars, this included thousands of service men and women. This memorial acts as a form of observance or funeral. “Here is their spirit, in the heart of the land they loved; and here we guard the record which they themselves made”. Australia celebrates a proud military history. Memorials are a large part of this, with many dedicated to a specific service or event.

The location of a memorial should be considered significant, such as that of the memorials to HMAS Sydney II in Geraldton and Carnarvon, Western Australia; as well as that of the Navy Memorial Park in Rockingham, Western Australia. The Sydney memorials are located in towns significant to where the ship was

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156 Queensland War Memorial Register.  
159 Ibid, x.  
160 Ibid, Cover.
believed to be sunk, in arguably Australia’s greatest maritime tragedy on 19 November 1941. The Navy Memorial Park, which has several plaques and monuments dedicated to several ships and naval units, is located directly across Cockburn Sound from the RAN’s West Australian Base, HMAS Stirling. With the Coral Sea memorial in Cardwell being as close to the action as possible the location should be considered noteworthy as the *Lexington* was damaged only 450 miles east of Townsville.\footnote{Australian-American Association, “We Remember Gratefully”, 9.}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{HMAS_Sydney_II_Memorial_Geraldton_WA.png}
\caption{Figure 4.2 (a): HMAS Sydney II Memorial, Geraldton, WA\footnote{Photograph taken by author on 11 October, 2011.}}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Naval_Memorial_Park_Rockingham_WA.png}
\caption{Figure 4.2 (b): Naval Memorial Park, Rockingham, WA.\footnote{Photograph taken by author on 11 October, 2011.}}
\end{figure}
The geographic location of Australia has prevented many war dead being buried on Australian soil, due to the vast majority of Australian forces being deployed to other sections of the globe. For this reason, the Australian War Memorial and other memorials serve a vital function as a visual site of grieving and remembrance similar to a tombstone or cemetery. Australia’s geographical location has also affected other forms of war memorialisation and memory.

There are some locations of the Coral Sea commemoration that are more noteworthy than others. Commemorations in Hobart are held for the ship which bore its name and took part in the battle.\textsuperscript{164} It was claimed in 2010 that “68 years on and the Battle of the Coral Sea remains as relevant now as it was in 1942”.\textsuperscript{165} If it indeed was as influential as many claim in preventing the invasion of Port Moresby and finally defeating the Japanese in a key engagement, should it be commemorated further?

\textsuperscript{163} Photograph taken by author on 13 October, 2011.

\textsuperscript{164} Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Tasmania.

In 1946, it was decided that a week should be dedicated to Coral Sea commemoration. In 1947, Labor minister Mr. Fuller “suggested that the anniversary of the Coral Sea Battle during the Pacific War should in future be set aside as a day for special commemoration”. It was then stated in 1951 that the aim of commemorating the Battle of the Coral Sea was to allow people to understand the impact the battle had on the Australian population. It has also been noted that Coral Sea Week should not take the place of Anzac Day, but rather, both should hold an important place on the Australian calendar. Recently, 

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166 Picture taken 13 October 2011.  
Coral Sea Week has moved into a more collective commemoration of the Battle for Australia, as its significance has diminished over time.\footnote{Robert Lewis, “The Battle of the Coral Sea”}

In 1997 James Bowen first proposed a Battle for Australia Day, to be observed annually.\footnote{James Bowen, “Wartime heroics on our doorstep worthy of recognition.” The Australian, September 1 2010 http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/wartime-heroics-on-our-doorstep-worthy-of-recognition/story-e6frg6zo-1225912533401 (accessed 5 October, 2011).} In 1942, Prime Minister John Curtin first coined the term Battle for Australia. This term reflected the geographical location of Australia and its vulnerability to Japanese attack. The term has since come to include the Battle of the Coral Sea, Kokoda and Guadalcanal.\footnote{James Bowen, “Wartime heroics on our doorstep worthy of recognition.”} All three of these battles were seen as direct interventions in the Japanese attempt to isolate and control Australia.

As a result of recognition of these Pacific battles the Returned Services League and the Department of Veterans Affairs instigated a Battle for Australia commemoration held at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance in 1999.\footnote{James Bowen, “Battle for Australia Commemoration 1999” http://www.battleforaustralia.org/Order_of_Service_1999.html (accessed 22 May, 2011).} The Battle for Australia Day was proclaimed by the Governor General and is held annually on the first Wednesday of September. “This annual event commemorates the service and sacrifice of all those who served in defence of Australia in 1942 and 1943 during a period when our nation appeared to face its greatest peril.”\footnote{Australian War Memorial, “Battle for Australia address, 2008” http://www.awm.gov.au/events/talks/battle_for_australia_2008.asp (accessed 22 May, 2011).} The wider population does not necessarily share the view of one battle being more significant in a certain situation than another. In Australia,
days such as Anzac Day and the Battle for Australia Day are often umbrellas for war commemoration in general as they celebrate and acknowledge much more than one battle.

For the ten year anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea, a special souvenir booklet was produced by the Australian-American Association. It stated that the significance of the battle “was not generally realised until its historical and geographical importance became evident in the march of events towards the final defeat of Japan”.175 The battle was later recognised as a milestone in Australian history as it marked the nearest approach of hostile forces to the mainland and “deliverance from threatened invasion”.176

In 1992, to mark the 50th anniversary of the battle, *The Australian* produced a special edition newspaper, including seven pages dedicated to the battle. It discussed all matters from a description of the battle, to the Australian-American relationship gained through it and also the controversial Brisbane Line. Although the paper recognised that Australia may not have been under direct threat of an invasion, it still recognised the battle’s importance in the history of Australia.177

Commemoration is not just confined to specific celebratory days or monuments. There are other socially popular ways of commemorating events. The Battle of

176 Ibid, 11.
the Coral Sea has had many books written specifically about it or has had substantial chapters dedicated to it in other publications. A book such as H.P. Willmott’s *The Barrier and the Javelin* has become a widely used source for detail on the Pacific War during the first half of 1942.\textsuperscript{178} Other books such as *Action Stations Coral Sea: The Australian Commander’s Story*, have been written specifically on the battle.\textsuperscript{179} There have also been publications written by the Australian-American Association on the battle.\textsuperscript{180} The wide array of accounts which have been written, indicate that the battle was of great significance. However, this significance can be attributed not only to the impact it had on Australia, but perhaps also to the change it brought to naval warfare and its impact in the early stages of the Pacific campaign.

The writing of books and other publications on the Battle of the Coral Sea have been an important way of memorialising the battle. They also have an important role in communicating the story of what occurred. Through this they enable new generations to remember and gain knowledge of a historically important event. There are, however, other World War Two battles, both naval and land based, which are perceived as more significant and have gained greater media attention. High profile actions such as the Battle of Britain, Midway and the struggle between Allied navies and the *Kriegsmarine* in the Atlantic are amongst those


battles regarded as more significant than the Battle of the Coral Sea.\textsuperscript{181} Therefore these military engagements have more published works, movies and documentaries produced about them and further monuments are built in their honour.

Without doubt the Battle of the Coral Sea holds a significant place in the history of Australia. This significance, however, is not necessarily commonly known by today’s population or shown in the way it is commemorated. Although there are commemoration services held each year, monuments built and books written, the Battle of the Coral Sea has been somewhat overshadowed by other military campaigns of the twentieth century. Battles such as Midway have ranked amongst the greatest of all time. For this reason they have become more famous in the popular mind.\textsuperscript{182}

Although other battles have arguably been more significant, the Battle of the Coral Sea has had a large impact on both the citizens of Australia and the United States. Commemoration of war in Australia has played a large role in defining a national identity. This can be seen through the resurgence of Anzac Day ceremonies, a day which now encompasses the commemoration of all battles in which Australia participated. The commemoration of the Battle of the Coral Sea as part of the Battle for Australia has been the subject of a combined celebration in many senses. As the years have progressed, the specific commemoration of the


\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
Battle of the Coral Sea has diminished, as it has moved into a collective memorialisation. Due to this, it could be argued that it has not received the recognition or the commemoration that a single battle, which is said to have saved Australia, deserves.
Conclusion

The Battle of the Coral Sea was a significant moment in the Pacific War. The Japanese had swiftly moved through the Pacific and South-East Asia after they attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Subsequently, the Allies had been on the defensive. Singapore and the Dutch East Indies had fallen, General Douglas MacArthur was forced from the Philippines and for the first time enemy action had taken place on Australian soil with the bombings of Darwin in February. The security of Australia in early 1942 was far from guaranteed.

A Japanese invasion of Australia was not guaranteed, however, it could be argued that isolation from the US and the other Pacific Islands was probable if Papua New Guinea became Japanese territory. The men who fought in the Coral Sea prevented such an action from occurring. Although it was not a definitive victory to the Allies, their strategic triumph was enough to ensure the safety of Australia, at least for the foreseeable future. As Prime Minister Curtin said of the men fighting the battle, “it may be for many of them the ‘last full measure of their devotion’ – to accomplish the increased safety and security of this territory”. 183 This statement was certainly true; the safety of Australia was increased following the strategic defeat of the Japanese in the Coral Sea.

Britain was preoccupied with fighting Germany in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa and showed very little interest in sending military assets to Australasia. The lack of British military units in and around this area had caused concern for the Australian population with the Japanese in such close surrounds. Australia was reliant on America and its forces to ensure its security. American servicemen would be based in Australia, often to the dismay of their Australian counterparts. However, Australia and America forged a strong bond throughout the Pacific campaign. This bond continued into current times and is expressed by the respective leaders of the nations. Barrack Obama has stated:

The cooperation between American and Australian naval forces during this battle marked an important evolution in our alliance. This alliance would ultimately help win World War II in the Pacific theatre, and was formalized in 1951 through the signing of the ANZUS Treaty. Almost 70 years later, our alliance remains one of the most important and dynamic in the world.\textsuperscript{184}

Australia and the United States gained a strong relationship through the time that they spent allied together in the Pacific campaign. Prime Minister Julia Gillard said in 2011, “To remember that in our darkest days we have been glad to see each other’s face and hear each other’s voice. In our days together under attack in the Pacific. In our decades together from Korea to the Gulf.”\textsuperscript{185} It should be noted from this that the Australian-American friendship of today was initially cemented through the Battle of the Coral Sea.


The commemoration of the Battle of the Coral Sea has been widespread, despite it being overshadowed somewhat by battles such as Kokoda and Midway. As time progresses, particular historical events may not be commemorated or remembered to everyone’s satisfaction. With memorials built in Queensland, and ceremonies held to honour the battle, and also several publications written in its honour, it can be argued that the Battle of the Coral Sea still has a large impact on the Australian war remembrance landscape. The Australian-American Association has organised services for Coral Sea commemoration in Australian capital cities. Whilst the relief that the Australian population felt after the success in the Coral Sea was focused on the threat of invasion, the commemoration of the Coral Sea has shifted to a wider more generalised Battle for Australia commemoration, held each September.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was followed one month later by the Battle of Midway. Midway, arguably one of the most famous battles in history, is regarded as changing the course of the Pacific War. The Allies were eager to continue their successes achieved in the Coral Sea and finally force Japan to take up a defensive stance. This American success would flow on to future battles at Guadalcanal and the Australians at Kokoda, where the Allies further cemented their presence as the new dominant power in the Pacific. In conjunction with the Coral Sea battle,

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Midway contributed to the safety of Australia. It was vital that the Allies built on their success at Coral Sea and did not once again allow the Japanese to gain the upper hand.

It can be asserted that the Battle of Midway was merely a continuation of the Battle of the Coral Sea, were both belligerents broke away from contact before a more definitive outcome was decided. The air-raids which continued on Australia until the end of 1943 could be seen as a result of the strength of Allied land-based aircraft present in area. The Japanese, trying to prevent any further losses in the region would attempt to destroy such air assets located in Australia. These bombings should not be seen as a direct threat to the security of the Australian mainland, but rather a Japanese attempt to once again gain a stronghold in the area. It was due to combined Allied successes in numerous actions across the Asia-Pacific that they were not able to do this.

The battle should not be considered to be the sole defender of the Australian mainland. The Australian government decided after the battles of Coral Sea, Midway and Kokoda that conscripted men should be allowed to fight overseas in a predefined area close to Australia. It should be noted that if the Battle of the Coral Sea had been as effective as once thought, that this change of legislation by the Australian government may not have been necessary.
Through the government response, its relationship with Midway and the way in which it has been commemorated it is evident that the Battle of the Coral Sea was an important moment in the Pacific campaign. The battle should be acknowledged as the first naval battle in which surface ships never sighted one another. It should also be remembered for its success in securing the safety of Australia. The battle was the first stepping stone which the Allies could use to ensure the safety of Australia from possible invasion or isolation whilst leading them to ultimate victory in the Pacific. The battle was also the beginning of a long lasting relationship between Australia and the United States.
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