



Time, change and continuity

the Battle of the Coral Sea

Did it save Australia?

The year 2002 is the 60th anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea.

This battle has long been celebrated and commemorated in Australia. For many years it was celebrated as the battle that 'saved' Australia. Did it? Should we still see this event as a special one in Australia's history that deserves special recognition?

THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

SUMMARY

The Battle of the Coral Sea was a series of naval engagements off the north-east coast of Australia between 4 and 8 May 1942.

It was fought by Allied (United States and Australian) and Japanese aircraft against four different major groups of warships.

Some of the aircraft involved were land-based, but most were from the opposing aircraft carriers.

It was the first aircraft carrier battle ever fought, and the first naval battle in which the opposing forces of surface ships at no stage sighted or fired at each other. All attacks were carried out by aeroplanes.

It is also the largest naval battle that has ever been fought off Australia's shores.

For many people at the time this was the 'battle that saved Australia.' Others say this is an exaggerated claim.

Sixty years on, as we commemorate and celebrate this event, it is important to understand just what did happen, and what its significance was to this fascinating aspect of Australia's history and heritage.

In this article you will be able to look at the facts and issues associated with the battle, and come to your own conclusion about its significance for Australians then and now.

THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA IN CONTEXT

'AUSTRALIA IS AT WAR ...'

During the 1930s Germany had expanded its territory. In 1939 it threatened to invade Poland. Britain and France warned that if Germany invaded they would

1942 - The Battle for Australia

During 2002 the Queensland ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee and Ryebuck Media will produce a variety of resources to help teachers celebrate and commemorate 1942 – the year of the 'Battle for Australia'.

The resources will include:

- Three articles in *STUDIES*, on the Battle of the Coral Sea, the American 'invasion', and the Home Front.
- A video and 64 page booklet
- A CD ROM to be distributed free of charge to all Queensland secondary schools, and available for purchase at a special reduced rate for all other schools.

Full details of these will be announced in the June edition of *STUDIES*.

oppose her. Germany did invade on 1 September, and on 3 September Britain and France declared war.

People in Australia were opposed to German expansion, and they were also very closely tied to Britain. When the British Government declared war, Prime Minister Menzies announced that 'Australia was also at war'.

Australia was not well-prepared to fight a war, and in this early part of the war Prime Minister Menzies stressed that it was 'Business As Usual' while an effective force and supply system were developed. The Royal Australian Navy was put under the control of the British; the Army began recruiting and training men; and RAAF men were promised to help the Royal Air Force.

THE WAR IN EUROPE

In the summer of 1940, German forces quickly overran much of Europe. By mid 1940, England was the only European nation still fighting against Germany. In the Battle of Britain, Germany's *Luftwaffe* tried to control the skies so it could launch a sea-borne invasion of Britain. However this tactic failed. Germany concentrated on bombing British cities, while the British attacked German supply centres.

Australian RAAF volunteers were sent to Britain in large numbers, mostly as bomber and fighter crews attached to the RAF. These men flew hundreds of dangerous missions eventually striking at the heart of Germany itself.

In 1941 Russia and then the USA entered the war against Germany – but there would be years of bitter fighting before Germany would be defeated.

THE WAR IN NORTH AFRICA, THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Australians played an important role in north Africa, the Mediterranean area and the Middle East between 1940 and 1942.

Royal Australian Navy ships were active in the Mediterranean against the Italian navy from 1940, and supported Australian troops at Tobruk. The ships took supplies to the besieged troops by night, frequently under heavy attack from the German *Luftwaffe*.

Australian troops had been sent to the Middle East early in 1941. They were very successful in defeating Italian troops at Benghazi, and Vichy French forces in Syria. The biggest test came against the German troops who were trying to take the port of Tobruk, a strategically important area. Allied troops, including many thousands of Australians, dug in and were able to hold off repeated and determined attacks. The Germans had contemptuously referred to the defenders as 'rats' in their holes – the Australians took on this title with pride, and called themselves the 'Rats of Tobruk'.

Australian troops were sent to defend Greece and Crete in 1941, but in a disastrous campaign they were forced to retreat, with the loss of many dead and thousands taken prisoner.

THE WAR IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

The Pacific War began because Japan was trying to obtain supplies of raw materials – such as rubber and tin – which were vital to its industrial expansion. It was also seeking to create a great Empire in Asia. It launched invasions of Thailand and Malaya, and attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The United States was the only country with sufficient naval power to oppose Japan in the Pacific - but the Japanese missed their most vital target in the Pearl Harbor attack, the American aircraft carriers. This would prove to be a telling and costly failure by the Japanese.

The Japanese seized many Pacific islands, and soon fought their way down the Malayan Peninsula to Singapore, the supposedly mighty British fortress which would stop them. Singapore fell in February 1942 and thousands of Allied troops, including over 15,000 Australians, became prisoners of the Japanese.

The Japanese were now poised to the north of Australia. Would they invade?

This was the context in which the Battle of the Coral Sea was fought in May 1942.

1939

- Sept 1 Germany invades Poland
- 3 Britain and France declare war on Germany
- 3 Prime Minister Menzies announces that 'Australia is also at war'

1940

- Jan 10 6th Division AIF sails for the Middle East
- Feb 28 Start of internment of some Italians in Australia
- April 9 Germany invades Denmark and Norway
- May 10 Germany invades Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg
- June 15 Communist Party banned
- June 22 France surrenders to Germany
- July 10 Battle Of Britain starts
- 11 Petrol rationing announced
- 19 HMAS *Sydney* sinks Italian cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni*
- Sep 5 First RAAF trainees to Canada
- 9 Japanese start occupying bases in Indo-China

1941

- Jan 3-5 Battle of Bardia
- 21-22 Tobruk captured
- Feb 5 WAAAF formed
- 6 Australian troops enter Benghazi
- 18 8th Division AIF arrives in Singapore
- Apr 6 Germany invades Greece and Yugoslavia
- 11 Siege of Tobruk begins
- 24 Retreat from Greece begins – many Australians taken prisoner
- May 20 Germans invade Crete many Australians taken prisoner
- Jun 22 Germany invades the Soviet Union
- Aug 18 AWAS formed
- Oct 7 John Curtin becomes Prime Minister
- Nov 19 HMAS *Sydney* sunk
- Dec 7-8 Japanese land in Thailand and Malaya
- Japanese attack Pearl Harbor
- USA declares war on Japan
- Australia declares war on Japan
- 11 Germany and Italy declare war on USA
- 22 First American troops in Australia

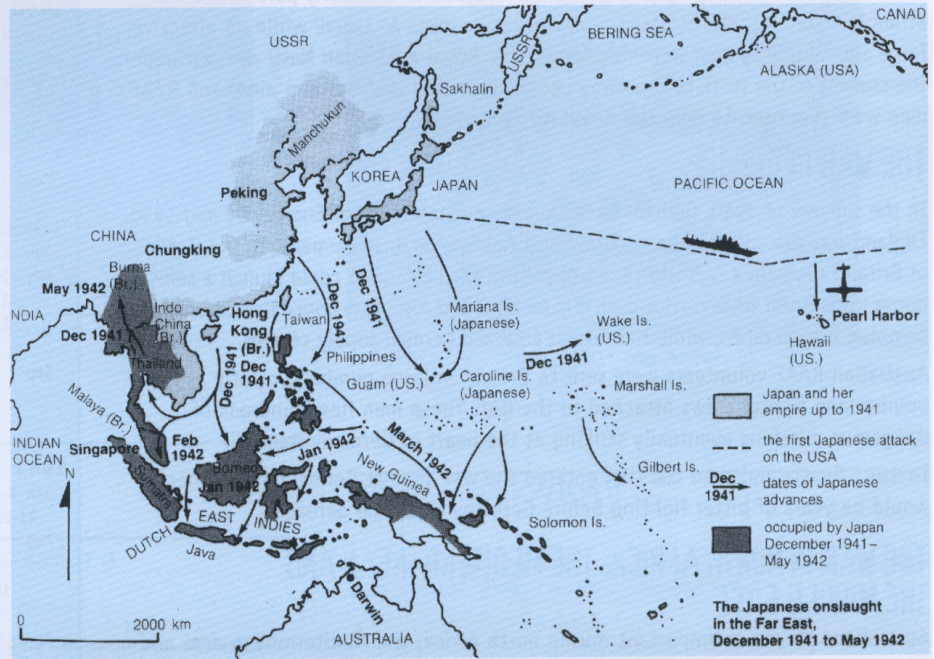
1942

- Jan 1 Daylight saving begins
- Jan-Feb Japanese capture Australian troops at Rabaul, Ambon, Timor
- Feb 2 First trial blackout in Sydney
- 14 Australian troops fight the Japanese at Gemas
- 15 Singapore surrenders
- 19 Japanese air raid on Darwin
- Mar 3 Japanese air attack on Broome and Wyndham
- 15 Introduction of compulsory ID cards for all adults in Australia
- 17 General MacArthur arrives in Australia
- 20 Japanese air raid on Derby
- 30 Rationing of tea, sugar, butter
- May 5-8 Battle of the Coral Sea
- 31 Japanese midget submarines in Sydney Harbour
- June 4-6 Battle of Midway

WHERE WAS THE BATTLE FOUGHT?

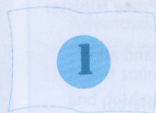
The battle took place in the Coral Sea, in an area separating the Solomon Islands, the eastern tip of New Guinea, and the north-eastern coast of Australia from Townsville to Horn Island. The Japanese had already gained control over much of the Pacific and were looking to take control of the southern part of New Guinea.

- 1 Use an atlas to mark the Coral Sea on this map.
- 2 On the map opposite show the direction from the middle of the Coral Sea to Japan, and to the USA.
- 3 Use an atlas to work out the approximate area of the Coral Sea.



WHO WAS INVOLVED?

There were basically four major groups of ships engaged in different parts of the fighting over the four-day period.



There was a **Japanese** Port Moresby Invasion Group, with a Support Force (Marushige) and a Covering Group (Goto), that included the small aircraft carrier Shoho and several cruisers.



The Allied Task Force 44 consisted of a **group of Allied warships, including two Australian ships, the heavy cruiser HMAS Australia and the light cruiser HMAS Hobart.** They were sent to find and attack this Invasion Group. This force was commanded by the Australian Rear-Admiral Crace.



There was also a **second Allied force of two aircraft carriers, the USS Lexington (commanded by Rear-Admiral Fitch) and the USS Yorktown (commanded by Rear-Admiral Fletcher),** together with protective cruisers and destroyers. Their task was to stop the invasion, and to do this they would have to tackle the main Japanese Carrier Striking Force.



The main target of the Allied carriers was the **Japanese Carrier Striking Force, with the aircraft carriers Zuikaku and Shokaku,** and protecting cruisers and destroyers, commanded by Admiral Takagi.

A battle fleet

Warships at this time were:

- aircraft carriers
- battleships
- cruisers (heavy or light)
- destroyers

The main variables between them were:

- their length
- their weight (measured by the amount of water they displaced)
- their armaments (number and size of guns)
- their speed.

In order of size they were:

- battleships
- carriers
- cruisers
- destroyers.

Generally, the larger the ship, the more guns it had, the heavier the armour for protection, the heavier it was, and the slower it became.

The one exception was the carriers, which were large, but displaced relatively little water, because they were lightly armed—their role being to provide the launching pad for aircraft rather than to shoot at other ships. Hence, in battle, all other ships had to protect the vulnerable but essential aircraft carriers. They did this by forming a protective screen around the carrier.

To achieve this the Japanese would first seize Tulagi on New Britain. Transports carrying soldiers and escorted by the aircraft carrier *Shoho* and other warships, would then leave Rabaul, and head around the tip of New Guinea to Port Moresby. They would be protected by two other aircraft carriers, the *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*, supported by cruisers and destroyers. The plan was for these Japanese carriers to intercept the American naval force from two sides as it entered the Coral Sea in response to the Japanese invasion.

The three Japanese aircraft carriers, with their protective 'screens' of warships, entered the Coral Sea early in May to support this invasion fleet. American intelligence knew that the Coral Sea action was about to happen—they had broken the Japanese secret naval codes, and were able to move ships into the area to oppose the enemy. But knowing what was happening, and then being strong enough to stop it, were two different things.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE IN THE BATTLE?

A common image of naval battles is ships firing at each other. That did not happen in the Battle of the Coral Sea. The single most important element needed to understand that battle is the fact that warships were vulnerable to attacks by aeroplanes.

For much of the time the opposing forces did not know where the enemy was. Radar, which would be used today to pinpoint the enemy, was very primitive and had only a short range. Each force sent out planes to find the other, but the limited range of the planes, the limited skills of many of the air crews in ship identification, the often poor weather and the huge areas involved all made it very difficult for the planes to find their targets. So for much of the time the opposing sides were blindly seeking each other, hoping to be the first to do so, and to be able to strike the first and decisive blow.

ATTACKING

The basic plan of attack by both sides was that the enemy's ships were to be destroyed by planes launching torpedoes or dropping bombs. These planes came from aircraft carriers.

So to defeat the enemy, you first had to destroy the 'runways' that allowed the attacking aircraft to operate—the aircraft carriers. If planes could not be launched or could not land, they immediately became useless. Carriers could be sunk by aircraft zooming in low and dropping torpedoes, which would hole the ship at or under the waterline; or by dropping bombs, which would damage the ship, and hopefully ignite ammunition or fuel and seriously damage and eventually destroy the ship. These planes would also fire their machine guns at the target, hoping to cause further death and damage. Fighter planes would also be there to defend the attacking aircraft against other fighter planes launched from the carrier under attack.

If the carriers could be destroyed, the other ships could be hunted down almost at leisure.

DEFENDING

Each aircraft carrier had a 'screen' of other warships around it to protect it from air attack. The job of these surrounding ships was to shoot down attacking aircraft before they reached the carrier.

At the same time, the carrier would zig-zag at high speed to make itself a more difficult target.

It would also launch fast and highly manoeuvrable fighter planes to attack the slower and more cumbersome attacking bombers.

So when you see newsreel footage or photographs of an attack, you are basically seeing:

- attacking fighter aircraft protecting the accompanying attacking bomber aircraft
- attacking bomber aircraft trying to get close to a carrier to launch torpedoes or drop bombs on it
- these aircraft continuing on to machine gun the target
- the protective screen of defending ships firing their guns to shoot down the attacking planes
- defending fighters also helping to attack the enemy aircraft and protect the carriers.

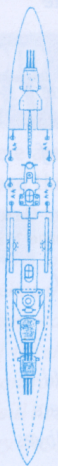
1 Draw a plan to show this. On your plan include:

- An aircraft carrier
- A screen of protective warships
- Different types of attacking aircraft – fighters, torpedo carriers and bombers
- Defending aircraft

HOW THE BATTLE UNFOLDED

- 4 May**
- The sequence of events started on 4 May.
 - A coastwatcher had reported seeing a fleet heading for Tulagi.
 - The *Yorktown* launched its planes to attack. They did some damage, but the main part of the invasion fleet was actually sailing from Rabaul towards Port Moresby. (See battle map, action number 1.)
 - The American Commander assumed the Japanese carriers would be protecting the flank of these transports, and started to steam towards New Guinea.
 - The main Japanese carrier fleet, however, had in fact hoped to catch the Americans from the rear, and were about to enter the Coral Sea near the Solomon Islands.
 - The opposing forces now tried to find each other in the vast area.
- 5–6 May**
- The opposing forces continued to search for each other by sending out reconnaissance flights.





- They occasionally re-fuelled to keep their tanks topped up, so that they had sufficient fuel to last through a long engagement involving high speed and long distances if required.
- 7 May**
- There were no sightings of the Japanese invasion fleet until 7 May.
 - Planes from the Japanese carriers *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* found the American fuel ship, USS *Neosho*, and its escort, USS *Sims*, and attacked and disabled them, believing at first that the tanker was a carrier. (See battle map action number 2.)
 - Meanwhile, planes from *Lexington* and *Yorktown* found the *Shoho*, and destroyed it. This was the first time the Japanese had been beaten in an engagement. (See battle map action number 3.)
 - Part of the fleet, including the two Australian ships, was now sent towards Papua to wait for and attack the expected Port Moresby invasion fleet. Unknown to the Allies the main Japanese invasion fleet had turned back—they were too vulnerable to land-based bombers without the air support of the *Shoho*.
 - This left the Australian ships waiting to engage an invasion fleet that would never come. But this did not mean they were safe. At one stage HMAS *Australia* was attacked by Japanese torpedo planes and bombers from Rabaul. Skilful manoeuvring of the ships meant that little damage was done. A number of US bombers saw this, but thought that they were American planes attacking a Japanese carrier, and joined in! Fortunately, they did no damage, and soon realised what was happening.

Searching and fighting could only be carried out safely and effectively during daylight. The Japanese gambled on finding the US force first, and sent out their planes late in the afternoon. This was risky. If they found the enemy and attacked it, they might cause great damage, and be able to come back the next day and finish off an 'easy' target; but if they did not find the ships, they would have to land back on their own carriers at night, a difficult and dangerous manoeuvre.

A Japanese pilot explained what happened to one group involved in this search.

Our aircraft soon fell victim to the delusions and 'mirages' brought on by exhaustion. Several times the pilots, despairing of their position over the sea, 'sighted' a friendly aircraft carrier. Finally a carrier was sighted, and the remaining eighteen bombers switched on their signal and blinker lights as they swung into their approach and landing pattern.

As the lead aircraft, with its flaps down and speed lowered, drifted toward the carrier deck to land, the pilot discovered the great ship ahead was an American carrier! Apparently the Americans also had erred in identification, for even as the bomber dropped near the carrier deck not a single

enemy gun fired. The Japanese pilot frantically opened his throttle and at full speed swung away from the vessel, followed by his astonished men.

Our aircrews were disgusted. They had flown for gruelling hours over the sea, bucked thunder squalls and, finally, had lost all trace of their positions relative to their own carriers. When finally they did sight the coveted American warship, cruising unsuspecting beneath eighteen bombers, they were without bombs or torpedoes.

Masatake Okuyima and Jiro Horikoshi, in Richard Hough, *The Longest Battle*, Cassell & Co, London, 1986 page 166

Only eighteen out of the twenty-seven planes that had flown out that afternoon made it back. All the dead were veteran pilots, and could not be easily replaced by the Japanese.

- 8 May**
- On 8 May reconnaissance flights from both sets of carriers finally found each other simultaneously. Though 320 kilometres apart, they launched their planes to attack. The flights of warplanes passed each other, and some of the opposing pilots actually saw each other on their way to attack.

THE MAIN BATTLE

Each side now used all its weapons against the other. The attackers sent in their dive-bombers and torpedo-bombers, and were met by fighter planes, and fire from the carriers and their screening ships. (See Battle map – action number 4.)

There was great confusion during the battle, and there was great bravery—on both sides.

The Japanese spotter who located the American fleet on 8 May flew back and radioed in the details. Japanese fighters and bombers took off, but the spotter pilot was so anxious to make sure that they found their targets that he guided them back, despite knowing that he would not have enough fuel to return to his carrier and land. We can only presume that he crashed and died at sea.

During the attack on *Shokaku* an American aviator dived his plane to within only a few metres of the ship to ensure the bomb hit the target—even though he knew that his plane could not pull out of the dive. He crashed into the sea beside the ship, but his bomb landed right on target, and the *Shokaku* was doomed.

These extracts from Australian, American and Japanese eyewitnesses involved in the conflict give some indication of the nature of the fighting that day.

Aboard a warship under attack

I scrambled through the escape hatch to man my battle station as a stretcher-bearer in the after-battle dressing station ... The 5-inch anti-aircraft guns could be heard in rapid fire, and the ship was shaking and vibrating from the full speed on our four large propellers and frequently changing course to dodge Japanese torpedoes.

Ed Znosko, Crewman on the USS *Chicago*, in Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Action Stations Coral Sea*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991 page 94)

All of a sudden all hell broke loose so I quite realised then this was definitely the Japs coming in. I turned

around to go down the hatch I'd come up, only to find it was securely locked. I was caught on the upper deck, so I just stood behind the turret. One of the Japanese torpedo bombers would have been 100 feet from the ship's side and level with the upper deck as it passed down the port side. Unbeknown to me they were spraying the ship with machine-gun bullets.

Jack Langrell crewman aboard HMAS Australia, in Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Action Stations Coral Sea*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991 page 96

The forward ... battery has the range on that first Jap. I see their shells, bright crimson tracers, tearing through the wings and fuselage. This plane wavers, begins a slow roll to its left and veers off just enough to pass in an inverted position just under our bow. As it glides by I see flames coming from the tail, and the machine smashes itself into the water 50 feet off our starboard bow.

The port forward ... battery ... concentrates its fire on the second Jap. As this plane zooms to cross almost directly over these guns, they hit it squarely with a shell. The explosion blows it to bits, its engine plunging into the water almost at the foot of the battery. Shreds of its wings and tail surfaces slither along the carrier's deck like sheets of paper swept in front of a gale.

Stanley Johnston, crewman aboard USS Lexington, in Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Action Stations Coral Sea*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991 page 118

Aboard an attacking war plane

When we attacked the enemy carriers we ran into a virtual wall of anti-aircraft fire; the carriers and their supporting ships blackened the sky with exploding shells and tracers. It seemed impossible that we could survive our bombing and torpedo runs through such incredible defences ... I had to fly directly above the waves to escape the enemy shells and tracers. In fact, when I turned away from the enemy carrier, I was so low that I almost struck the bow of the ship, for I was flying below the level of the flight deck. I could see the crewmen of the ship staring at my plane as it rushed by.

Shigekazu Shimazaki, commander of Zuikaku, in Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Action Stations Coral Sea*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991 page 119

Listening in to air traffic during the deadly combat

We could hear ... the comments of various pilots ... [who] in some cases were running out of fuel or could not land on the Lexington or the Yorktown as they were either damaged or on fire. Many messages were goodbyes to friends or loved ones.

Mervyn Johnston, crewman aboard HMAS Australia, in Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Action Stations Coral Sea*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, page 125

Hundreds of men died that day.

WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME? WHY?

The US fleet suffered greater losses in the battle.

US losses: One carrier destroyed, one damaged, one oiler and one destroyer sunk, 66 aircraft lost, and 543 men killed or wounded.

Japanese losses: One small carrier destroyed, one carrier severely damaged, one destroyer and three small naval ships sunk, 77 carrier aircraft lost, and 1 074 men killed or wounded.

Mitsuo Fuchido and Masataku Okumiya, *Midway. The Battle That Doomed Japan*, Hutchinson, 1957 pp 116-7

WHY DID THE BATTLE TURN OUT THE WAY IT DID?

Here are eight paragraphs, each of which contributes to an explanation of the outcome. Organise them into a logical order.

- In the longer term, however, the Allies gained far more from the engagement than did the Japanese.
- The Allies sometimes needed that luck—as some of their weapons were decidedly inferior. The Devastator Torpedo Bomber, for example, had to fly low and slowly for a long period when coming in to release its torpedoes against the enemy, and in doing so became 'sitting ducks' for the gunners aboard the target ship. Then, even if the Devastators were able to release their torpedoes, they were likely not to stay on course, or if they did hit, not to explode!
- The Americans also had luck during their attack—the two Japanese carriers were about twelve kilometres apart and one was covered in cloud, so the US pilots could concentrate on one, free from the protective guns of the other. They destroyed the Shokaku. This meant also that the Shokaku's planes, when they returned from attacking the US carriers, had to land on the Zuikaku; but that ship was unable to handle the number of planes arriving, and crew had to push landed planes overboard to allow more incoming ones to land. The Japanese lost forty-five of the seventy-two aircraft operational at the outset of battle on 7 May.
- The Americans had the advantages of knowing what the enemy were planning, due to being able to intercept and decode their secret signals. The American also had radar that could identify incoming enemy aircraft in time for them to scramble their own fighters into the air to attack them.
- The battle ended the proposed Japanese sea-borne invasion of Port Moresby. When they attacked the American fleet at Midway the next month, the weakened Japanese were met by a stronger Allied fleet than they had expected, and were defeated. This was the end of Japanese naval power in the Pacific.
- The Japanese also made tactical mistakes—they wasted valuable searching hours while attacking a relatively unimportant target, the tanker. They also lost the gamble involved in searching for their targets during the late afternoon, resulting in the loss of irreplaceable combat-experienced air crew.

- The slowness of the Devastator also meant that the aircraft dropping bombs arrived at the target before them, and had to wait to carry out their attack formation of simultaneous high-level bombing and low-level torpedo strikes. The Japanese thus had time to disrupt the pattern and reduce its effectiveness.
- A large part of the outcome was due to Japanese complacency and failure of naval intelligence—they underestimated the strength of the forces available to the US, believing that it could only provide one carrier instead of two. Thus, they did not assign to the invasion the full strength that was available to them.

DID THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA SAVE AUSTRALIA FROM INVASION?

Here are six pieces of information or evidence to help you answer that question. Read them, then answer the questions that follow.

1 *Events that are taking place today are of crucial importance to the whole conduct of the war in this theatre ... I should add that at this moment nobody can tell what the result of the engagement may be. If it should go advantageously, we shall have cause for great gratitude and our position will then be somewhat clearer. But if we should not have the advantages from this battle for which we hope, all that confronts us is a sterner ordeal and a greater and grave responsibility. 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.*

Speech by Prime Minister John Curtin, in Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Action Stations Coral Sea*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, page 129

3 *By early 1942 the Japanese had achieved their initial aim of having a defensible perimeter around their territorial gains.*

A war plan of November 1941 identified areas to be rapidly occupied or destroyed as soon as the war situation permitted, and 'important points in the Australian area' were part of that. There was disagreement between the Japanese Army and Navy leaders about how the war plan should be carried out after the seizing of a defensible perimeter had been achieved.

5 *The Navy advocated either a direct invasion of Australia, or a western advance against India and Ceylon. Critics feared that this Navy plan of an invasion of Australia would take far more ships and men than Japan had available.*

2 *Coming from duty one bright moonlit night, I noticed something strange about the shapes of some of the [mangrove] trees. It was 1 am, but seeing a light in the Commanding Officer's office, I knocked and asked, 'Sir, why is there a soldier sitting in the branches of every third tree, and facing out to sea?' He looked at me in the eye and said, 'Corporal, there are no soldiers and if there are, you didn't see them. And if you saw them, you certainly will not mention them to anyone else!'*

WAAAF radar operator, quoted in Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Action Stations Coral Sea*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, page 130)

4 *The Army favoured continuing the offensive beyond New Britain, to include capturing Port Moresby, the Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa. This would cut off communication and supplies between Australia and the United States, thereby isolating Australia and negating its potential as a supplier of fighting personnel and commodities, and a base from which resurgent American military might could be applied against Japan's new possessions.*

6 *Admiral Yamamoto had a third plan—to bring on a decisive naval confrontation against the United States as soon as possible, at Midway. This plan went ahead in June 1942. Yorktown, which the Japanese had believed sunk at the Coral Sea, was able to take part at Midway, but the two Japanese carriers had not been repaired. The Coral Sea thus made some contribution to the outcome at Midway, which was that the Japanese Pacific fleet was virtually destroyed. This opened the way for the Allies to regain all the areas that had fallen to the Japanese in the Pacific, though only after several more years, and enormous losses.*

- 1 Were there Japanese plans to invade Australia?
- 2 Why might people at the time have feared an invasion?
- 3 Imagine that Admiral Yamamoto had in fact defeated the United States Pacific Fleet at Midway – what might have been Australia's position then?
- 4 What would you now say was the significance of the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942 for Australia?

Each year since 1946 Coral Sea Week has been celebrated in Australia with marches by service personnel from both Australia and the USA, and official functions for visiting American dignitaries. These celebrations express gratitude to the United States for its part in the battle, and the support given to Australia by America in World War 2.

More recently the commemorative emphasis has moved from the 'Battle that saved Australia' to the broader concept of the 'Battle for Australia', held on the first Wednesday in September. This now marks not only the Battle of the Coral Sea, but also the contribution and significance of all those who helped defend Australia at its most vulnerable time—the men on the Kokoda Track, the airmen in northern Australia and Papua, the sailors and merchant seamen keeping supply lines open, and the men and women in Australia in the services, as civilian workers, or volunteers on the home front.