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## THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

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Fifty four years ago, the nations of the free world were at the lowest point of prestige and morale. The Japanese were advancing on all fronts. The Germans had overrun most of Europe and were invading Russia. The Japanese has captured Singapore, Hong Kong, the Phillippines, and had overrun Southeast Asia.

A Japanese admiral named it "Victory Disease." It is the feeling of invincibility. Imperial General Headquarters, not content with the most rapid, stupendous conquest made in modern times, now embarked on a plan for still further aggression. First, Tulagi in the Solomon Islands and Port Moresby in Papua would be seized to secure air mastery of the Coral Sea. The combined fleet would cross the Pacific to "annihilate" what remained of the United States Pacific Fleet after Pearl Harbor, and at the same time capture Midway Island and the Western Aleutians. This would surely open the way to the invasion of New Caledonia, the Fiji's, Samoa, and eventually Australia.

Admiral Yamamoto knew that the destruction of the Pacific Fleet must be completed before 1943, with the Pacific Fleet wiped out the Americans would tire of a futile war and negotiate a peace which would leave Japan master of the Pacific. Such was the plan and the confident expectation of the war lords in Tokyo.

The allies of the Pacific Area thought they had an antidote for the "Victory Disease." It was Task Force 17, a two-carrier group commanded by Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher. Cincpac Intelligence smoked out the plan by April 17th, 1942, and put a plan in motion to stop

the Japanese advance. Unbeknownst to the Japanese high command, the Americans had broken the Japanese top secret code.

The stage was set. The stakes were high. The battle of the Coral Sea was the first great naval action between aircraft carriers; the first naval battle in which no ship on either side sighted the other.

The Japanese plan was in three phases. The first phase was Rear Admiral Shima's who was tasked with the job of occupying Tulagi in the lower Solomons and establishing a seaplane base. Second, Rear Admiral Kajioka was to take his force and invade Port Moresby. He had with him a sizable army in a dozen transports, covered by heavy cruisers and the light carrier Shoho. Third, Vice Admiral Takagi's big carrier striking force, including Shokoku and Zuikaku, veterans of Pearl Harbor, were to enter the Coral Sea from the East, and destroy anything the Allies might offer to interfere with this plan. The whole plan was directed by Commander in Chief Fourth Fleet, Vice Admiral Inouye.

Admiral Nimitz, Cincpac, had only half his force available. The carriers, Hornet and Enterprise, had been detached with a force commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel James H. Doolittle to bomb Tokyo. Nimitz called upon Admiral Fletcher, basically a surface ship commander, from New Caledonia. Fletcher brought with him the Yorktown, and other minor surface ships. The Yorktown, already known as the "Waltzing Matilda of the Fleet" was ordered to cut short a period of upkeep at New Caledonia, waltzing over to the Coral Sea and rendezvousing with the "Lady Lex" who, with Admiral Aubrey Fitch, was in Pearl Harbor. Most of the ships of "MacArthur's Navy," not yet named Seventh Fleet, also joined. There were three cruisers; H.M.A.S. Australia and Hobart, U.S.S. Chicago, and a few destroyers, under the

command of Rear Admiral J.G. Crace R.N.

Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher was thrust into the role of on-scene commander in the most decisive sea battle in the war to date. Fletcher was a deep-sea sailor, whose experience from the beginning had been in ships, big ships, battleships and cruisers. To him an aircraft carrier was primarily a ship which carried planes but was still to be managed as a ship. Admiral King, Chief of Naval Operations, was not pleased with Fletcher's non aggressive performance. He questioned Fletcher's slow response when asked to relieve the Phillipine garrison at Corregidor. Admiral Nimitz, the great pacifier, agreed that Fletcher's conduct so far had <sup>NOT</sup> been aggressive. But since Halsey was not going to be back in time to help, Fletcher was all they had. Admiral Bill Halsey was commanding the Hornet and Enterprise on their mission supporting Jimmy Dolittle's bombing of Tokyo. Nimitz and King realized the Japanese would not wait to conquer the Coral Sea.

Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch was an aviator and took a different view of aircraft carrier operations. He realized that the upcoming battle was going to be fought by aircraft versus ships not ships versus ships.

The Japanese easily accomplished their first phase, Admiral Shima's group occupied Tulagi unopposed on May 3rd and started construction of a seaplane base.

The first shots were fired on the morning of May 4th when aircraft launched from Yorktown descended on the newly arrived Japanese fleet. At 8:45 A.M., the eager yet inexperienced American Airmen reported a cruiser, two very large transports, three smaller transports, two destroyers, four gunboats and various other small craft. Lieutenant Commander

W. D. Burch led the thirteen dive bombers laden with one thousand pound bombs. Burch's group dove from 19,000 feet, moving to an angle of 70 degrees when they hit 10,000 feet. Then holding steady until 2,500 feet, the pilots pulled back on the stick thus releasing the bombs.

The next flight to reach the scene some minutes later was Lieutenant Commander Joe Taylor's twelve torpedo bombers. The first attack on a transport failed, but the second wave sunk the minesweeper Tama Maru and a smaller craft. They also holed the destroyer Kikuzuki.

As the torpedo bombers headed for home, the second wave of fifteen dive bombers led by Lieutenant W.C. Short hit the fleet. This group of dive bombers did little damage and returned the Yorktown.

The Navy airmen were back on board the Yorktown in under an hour. They refueled and rearmed and headed back for a second attack. The Japanese started to scatter from Tulagi Harbor and ~~saught~~<sup>SOUGHT</sup> refuge in safer ports. The Japanese on Tulagi cried for help from Admiral Takagi's large carrier task force. Takagi was refueling at Bongainville and knew he could not arrive until after nightfall.

The Americans were straining for action and launched a third strike at 1430 hours or 2:30 p.m., that resulted in more hits on small craft and landing barges. The pilots were jubilant having met the enemy in open battle for the first time. They believed they had sunk two destroyers, a freighter, four gunboats, beached a light cruiser, and damaged another destroyer, freighter and a seaplane tender. The Japanese reported minor damage. Thus ended the first day.

Nothing much happened on the 5th and 6th day when each big carrier force was searching for its enemy without much success. At one time they were only 70 miles apart. The 6th day of May, 1942, General Wainwright surrendered Corregidor in the Phillipines. This marked the low

point of the entire war for American arms. But, the next day opened with a bright dawn. The transition from Corregidor to the Coral Sea was startling and dramatic.

At dawn on the 7th, Shokaku and Zuikaku sent out a search mission for an enemy force they suspected to be in the Coral Sea. Their search planes sighted Fletcher's retiring fueling group, fleet oiler Neosho and destroyer Sims. The pilots reported back to Admiral Takagi that they had spotted a carrier and a cruiser. Takagi ordered an all out attack on these two hapless vessels. After a spirited defense, Sims was sunk and Neosho limped off to sink four days later. The Japanese lost six aircraft and more importantly saved the American carriers from attack. The Japanese thought they had destroyed a large part of the American fleet.

The American planes, however, were off on a similar wild goose chase. The report was received from Yorktown's search planes that they had sighted two carriers and four heavy cruisers about 175 miles northwest of the American force. Fletcher, naturally assuming that this meant Takagi's Striking Force, Launched full deckloads to go after it. When these aircraft were already airborne it was discovered that the "two carriers and four heavy cruisers" should have been reported as "two heavy cruisers and two destroyers". The Americans had discovered the second phase of the Japanese battle plan, Admiral Kajioka's Port Moresby invasion force. The aircraft from Lexington and Yorktown found the light carrier Shoho and bore in for the attack. They sunk Shoho in ten minutes, a record for the entire war. "Scratch one flattop", was radioed back to Admiral Fletcher.

It was not the right flattop, but the loss of Shoho so devastated Admiral Inouye, the overall Japanese Commander, that he ordered the Port Moresby invasion group to retire. Thus, our attack on the wrong carrier thwarted the enemy's main objective.

Rear Admiral J. G. Crace, of His Majesty's Royal Navy, was detached from Fletcher's gallantly weakened force with his two Australian cruisers, the U.S.S. Chicago and a few destroyers. "Crace's Chase" was designed to intercept and thwart Admiral Kajioka's Port Moresby invasion force. Admiral Crace handled this mixed group so efficiently as to beat off 31 land based bombers from Raboul without receiving a scratch. He also fought off three U.S. Army Air Force B-17's from the Townsville (Queensland) base, which thought his ships were Japanese. To cap this comedy the thwarted Japanese planes claimed to have sunk two battleships and a heavy cruiser.

Toward evening of the same day, 7 May, Takagi sent a search-attack mission to find and bomb Fletcher's carriers. They missed the flattops, but had a rough experience. First, they were intercepted by Fletcher's fighter planes and lost nine of their number; then, after dark, six tried to land on Yorktown, mistaking her for Japanese. Eleven more aircraft were lost trying to make night landings on *their own* carriers.

The two forces opposing each other had sparred and had minor skirmishes, but had not really slugged it out. On the morning of May 8th, the two commanders knew that this day would bring the main fighting. Fletcher handed over tactical command of the fleet to Rear Admiral Aubrey Fitch and Admiral Takagi handed the same to Admiral Hara. Both the latter mentioned commanders had previous carrier experience which Fletcher and Takagi did not.

The two fleets sent out scout planes to locate the enemy. For two hours nothing happened. Then at 0820, Lieutenant Joseph Smith, flying a Scout S-2-S, saw something below him. He took another good look and radioed excitedly back to the carrier. Lieutenant Smith had spotted two carriers, four cruisers and three destroyers, but Lexington did not yet know his

position, and was frantically trying to raise him again. Yorktown, not Lexington, finally received the information that the Japanese fleet was approximately 120 miles away to the northeast. Three minutes later Admiral Fletcher knew that the American task force had been spotted by a Japanese scout plane.

Admiral Takagi had steamed north all night to protect the Port Moresby invasion force. Admiral Hara's scout plane had found the American fleet. He also made a bold move by launching his attack force of 90 planes before the American ships were actually spotted. In this way he hoped to gain a jump on the Americans and catch the carrier planes still on the deck.

At 0838, Admiral Fitch signalled for the launch of his entire striking group. Half an hour later Admiral Fletcher gave tactical commands to Admiral Fitch.

The weather was an ally to the Japanese as their force was in the cover of a cold front, which meant foul weather and plenty of cloud cover. The American fleet had moved out of that area, and into pure, bright sunlight. This good weather made the carriers a good target for Japanese planes.

Yorktown's planes got away first. At 0924, the carrier launched 24 dive bombers, six fighters and nine torpedo bombers. Lexington launched ten minutes later, putting up 24 dive bombers, ten fighters, and twelve torpedo planes. Eighty-five aircraft were headed for the Japanese fleet.

The Japanese fleet launched an equal amount of attack aircraft. The two opposing forces were equal in surface ships defending the two fleets. Admiral Hara, the Japanese officer in tactical command, had a screen of four heavy cruisers and six destroyers. Fitch had five cruisers and seven destroyers defending the American fleet. The Japanese fleet had one great advantage in

that they were in a belt of heavy overcast which shrouded the fleet while the Americans were out in the clear under brilliant sunshine.

The Yorktown attack group missed Zuikaku under a rain squall so they concentrated on Shokaku and obtained two direct hits. One of these bombs bent the flight deck and prevented Shokaku from further aircraft launches. The torpedo bombers were next and reported three hits on Shokaku out of nine launched. The Yorktown group, having accomplished their mission, returned to their ship.

Yorktown's attack group left the scene as Lexington's group arrived a 1140 hours. Zuikaku came out of the squall and saw Shokaku on fire. The Lexington's dive bombers got lost and never arrived at the battle scene. The torpedo bombers from the Lexington came in last and reported five hits on the enemy carriers.

Shokaku was very seriously damaged. More than a hundred of her crew had been killed and nearly fifty more wounded. Admiral Takagi, after surveying the damage, sent Shokaku to Japan for extensive repairs. Zuikaku took all the remaining planes on board and waited for reports from his own strike force.

The Japanese were luckier and more skillful than the Americans, for their planes followed the American scouts back to the carriers and wasted no time in their search. At 1119 hours the first Japanese torpedo planes attacked both Lexington and Yorktown. Yorktown took a direct hit from a dive bomber which put a hole in her flight deck and killed sixty men. "Lady Lex" received two torpedoes and two bomb hits. The crew and men fought bravely, but Lexington was badly damaged.

Ironically, the returning strike forces ran into each other and had a pitched battle halfway



between the two forces. The Lexington was under her own power and seemed to have the fires under control. Yorktown had repaired her deck and was able to recover her aircraft. Lexington had received two torpedoes, one of which had damaged the gasoline tanks on the port side. Those tanks ruptured and a devastating explosion rocked the ship at 1247 hours. At 1456 hours, a second large explosion rocked the "Lady", she was doomed. At 1707 it looked hopeless and Admiral Fitch ordered "**Abandon Ship!**" At 1922 hours the destroyers were told to sink Lexington after all the crew was clear. Two final large explosions sank "The queen of the flattops" at 1952 hours on the 8th day of May, 1942.

Admiral Fletcher considered a night surface attack against Takagi, but decided against it. Takagi thought he had sunk two American carriers and considered it a Japanese victory. The Japanese retired to Raboul and the American fleet retired to New Caledonia.

The Japanese won the battle on tonnage sunk with the loss of Lexington, but a strategic victory was won by the allies. They thwarted the invasion of Port Moresby and put many doubts in the minds of the Japanese high command. It ended the string of unabated Japanese conquest. Shokaku took two months to repair and Zuikaku took over one month to replace her plane losses. Thus, neither big flattop could take part in the great battle coming up. Yorktown returned to be repaired in only three days and did fight in the battle of Midway less than a month later.

The battle of the Coral Sea meant the end of Japanese expansion southward. The Imperial Forces would not again threaten Australia and New Zealand. In a few weeks the U.S. Marines landed at Guadalcanal and after a few months the Japanese would be driven out of the Soloman Islands. The Americans would have a resounding victory at Midway. So, there would be no more  , no more expansion, no more victories for Japan. From this point on, the

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Japanese were marching down the road of defeat. That was the significance of the Battle of the Coral Sea.