

# Stemming the Tide: Battle of the Coral Sea

## 7th - 8th May, 1942

And prologue, Early April - 7th May, 1942

### **Setup for battle, Early April - 4th May, 1942**

The first days of April, 1942, saw Japan, once more the land of gods it seemed, in the possession of virtually all former Western colonies in South-East Asia. Japan had won successes so spectacular in nature that by the time Admiral Nagumo's First Air Fleet returned from its intimidating but remarkably fruitless excursion to South-East-Asia, the Japanese time schedule had been toppled - Nippon was several months ahead of it. Japan had its "Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" - if one turned an blind eye to certain parts of the Philippines, where U.S. forces continued to give battle to the Japanese - an empire making the Land of the Rising Sun independent of the Western nations once and for all.

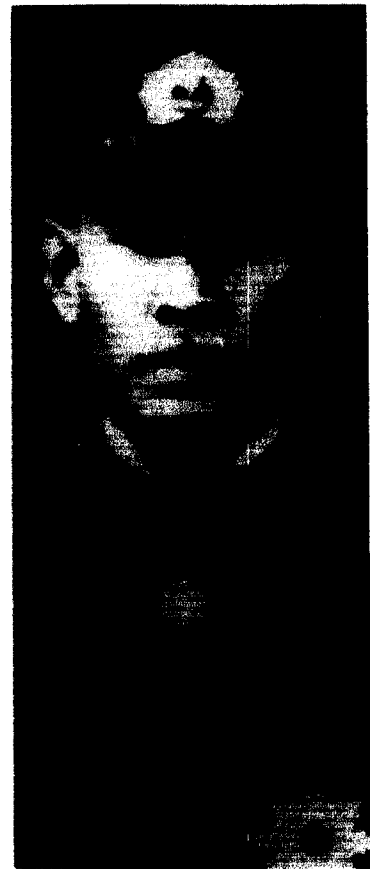
The preceding five months of operations had been carefully pre-planned: objectives had been scouted and discussed, and attacked later. The Army was landed where it wanted, and the Navy retained forces to raid Darwin, Ceylon, and the Bay of Bengal. However, the dark cloud of inter-service rivalry was not about to have vanished forever, for the precisely planned part of the war lay behind the Japanese. What was next would be a problem.

Phase II of the Japanese war plan called for the securing of the "Outer Perimeter" - the border of the empire, and first in its lines of defense. But where, the planners asked, should this phase begin? And was this plan right anyway? Had not Japan defeated in five months time the three largest colonial powers in South-East Asia? Had it not conquered the entire area? And had it not crippled, destroyed, and defeated the U.S. fleet with but one blow? Perhaps, some in the Imperial General Headquarters wondered, Japan could now see its own greatness. Suggested was a strike towards Persia, throwing the British out of India and linking with Rommel's hopefully successful army on the oil-fields of Iraq. Then, the Axis would throw itself on the Sowjetunion, securing for Japan, Siberia.

The Navy wanted Australia, deemed the base of every U.S. effort to attack Japan's newly won empire. The Army, sensible for once, deemed a more modest approach the most favorable. It called for Operation MO, designed to pull the string around Australia's neck tighter. The Navy was asked - ordered, given the Army superiority in the Imperial General Headquarters - to support a two-fold operation in the Coral Sea. The island of Tulagi, housing a useful harbor, and lying just north of the larger island of Guadalcanal, was to be occupied as a first step for an attack further south. At the same time, a large convoy of transports should ferry Japanese soldiers toward Port Moresby, on the south-east of New Guinea, the last stronghold of the Allies on that island.

At the same time - at least approximately - however, the US was to conduct the strategically most far-reaching carrier raid in history. USS *Hornet*, newest of the *Yorktown* class, and her companion *Enterprise*, had secretly reached a point a mere 650 miles from Tokyo and, turning *Hornet* into the wind, Vice-Admiral William Halsey dispatched 16 USAAF B-25 bombers, modified for long-range flights, and departed the area. These bombers struck Tokyo, Yokosuka and other cities on April 18th, 1942.

Physical damage was slight, but the Navy's pride had taken a severe blow. The defense of the Home Islands was the Navy's job, and now the



*Vice-Admiral Inoue  
Shigeyoshi, commander-in-  
chief, Outer South Seas  
Forces*

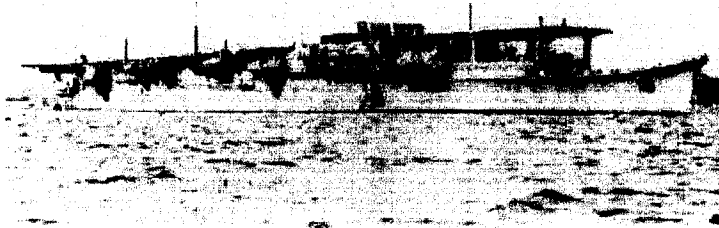
U.S. had demonstrated that it possessed the tools to kill the Emperor - the most shocking part of this entire operation for Yamamoto.

The raid had the effect of confirming for Yamamoto that a "decisive battle" was needed.

For this, Yamamoto wanted the *crème de la crème* of the Combined Fleet. Yet the necessity of supporting the Army's South Pacific operations denied him the chance to use his full force, though he did not yet know it. Despite having no reports whatsoever of U.S. carrier presence, he refused to believe that the U.S. would dare check the Japanese advance, and committed his forces. The Fifth Carrier Division, heavy carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, under the command of Rear-Admiral Hara Chuichi, and escorts, cruisers *Myoko* and *Haguro*, and destroyers, the whole under the command of Vice-Admiral Takagi Takeo, was assigned as covering force. In addition, the light carrier *Shoho* and four heavy cruisers, under the command of Rear-Admiral Goto Aritomo, were to provide closer but still distant cover first to the Tulagi group, then to the Invasion Fleet for Port Moresby.

(It is interesting to note the following: Japanese Radio Intelligence had disclosed the possible – probable – presence of American carriers in the Coral Sea. Longing for the decisive battle, Yamamoto overlooked that the full fighting power of the Combined Fleet might have forced battle in the South Pacific, against an unprepared foe, well within range of land-based air. Then, after having destroyed half of the US carriers in the Pacific, the Japanese would have an far easier stand at their decisive battle. It was not to be, however, a fault which can again be credited to Yamamoto.)

Twelve transport ships were comprising the main body of the Port Moresby Invasion force, plus assorted escorts. In addition, two destroyers and light forces would be the Tulagi Invasion force. The overall command had Vice-Admiral Inouye Shigeyoshi at Rabaul.



*The light carrier Shoho - sometimes referred to as the worst conversion ever done.*

On the other side was a more adhoc force of ships, assembled to repulse what was known of the Japanese plans. "Zeal" intercepts had disclosed the Japanese plans in a large part. Admiral Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC at Pearl Harbor, saw himself confronted with a major push south, which not only threatened his Australia-bound convoys, but also Australia itself, should Port Moresby fall. However, two of his heavy carriers were still off after the Doolittle Raid, which left him with two other carriers in the area. While hurrying *Enterprise* and *Hornet* south, he ordered the other two assembled.

These two carriers were USS *Lexington*, under the command of Rear-Admiral Aubrey Fitch, and *Yorktown*, under Rear-Admiral Frank Fletcher. In addition, British Rear-Admiral Sir John Crace was to lead the cruisers *Australia*, *Chicago* and *Hobart* to the scheduled meeting point off the New Hebrides on May 1st, 1942.

Rear Admiral Fletcher was the prime U.S. seagoing commander of 1942. He had held command of *Yorktown* ever since she participated in the Pacific battles, and had earlier been commander of a cruiser division, besides holding the job of Commander, Cruisers, Pacific Fleet.. These posts had made him an able carrier commander, for this part of the war. Fletchers mission, as given by Admiral Nimitz, had left open to

him what he wanted to do once arriving at the meeting point with Fitch's carrier.

Already by April 30, the Tulagi Invasion Group under Rear-Admiral Shima had left Rabaul in New Britain. A day later, the covering force of carriers under Takagi departed Truk, Japan's most important naval base for the next two years.

Fletcher's forces, meanwhile, had met as scheduled on May 1st, and took two days of refueling, however separated, which placed *Yorktown* and Fletcher a hundred nautical miles north of Fitch's forces, now also comprising Crace's cruisers. These forces were to meet on oh-eighthundred on May 4th. Fletcher's plan, however, changed when two Australian search planes from MacArthur's command spotted Shima's light forces off Tulagi. Fletcher, in a dashing style never repeated by him, sped nothward at 24 knots with *Yorktown* and her escorts. The oiler *Neosho* and the destroyer *Russell* from the fleet's train, having refueled Task Force 17, were detached to meet with Fitch.

Japanese naval officers in all staffs were unaware of the danger they were facing. Since no numbers or any report had been offered to the fleet by the Japanese radio intelligence, Takagi in charge of the screening operations seemed to discount the possibility of strong enemy forces in the area. He was in for a surprise.

Fletcher reached the area from where he intended to launch in the early morning hours of May 4th, around 7 o'clock. From *Yorktown*, 28 SDB Dauntless divebombers, 18 TBD Devastator torpedo-planes and a six-plane escort of Wildcats ascended into a partly cloudy sky. The planes reached their targets at 0820 hours. In a three-wave attack, which lasted until 1530 hours the same day, *Yorktown's* aviators succeeded in sinking the destroyer *Kikuzuki*, two patrol-boats, and a transport. It was a decidedly modest result, counting the ammo expended, and all the more so because now, the Japanese got alerted. There were no single-engined land-based planes in the vicinity of Tulagi - at least no US planes. This meant, even though no detection was managed, that a carrier had to be around.

### ***Battle of the Coral Sea, 5th - 7th April, 1942***

While Fletcher showed the Japanese that they were not alone, the Port Moresby Invasion Group had departed Rabaul on May 4th, and turned west-south-west, toward the Jomard Passage between New-Guinea and the Louisiade Archipelago. In the meantime, Admiral Takagi guided his heavy carrier around the Solomons, rushing down the eastern side, and turning into the Coral Sea around San Cristobal Island on May 5th, to engage the U.S. carrier(s?).

Unlucky Takagi missed his chance that day, when both *Yorktown* and *Lexington*, having finally met, topped off their fuel tanks, in which situation they were extremely vulnerable. Having done that, Fletcher set off toward New-Guinea, there to intercept the transports of the Port Moresby Group. Over the next day, May 6th, both groups were prowling the Coral Sea, and the night from 5th to 6th had seen the two foes pass each other at a mere 70 nautical miles, half-an-hour of flying time for the Japanese.

The day of May 6th passed without major events. Admiral Inoue at Rabaul saw himself with only a few floatplanes left to do reconnaissance, and the failure of one to return - *Yorktown's* planes had caught it - indicated to Inoue the presence of a carrier once again.

Fletcher had spent the day sitting a hundred miles south of the Jomard Passage, waiting for the Port Moresby group. Takagi, relying on Rabaul's air assets, failed to utilize his planes properly. Neither side saw each other. However, over the day B-17 bombers of MacArthur's command spotted the entire Port Moresby assets including the light carrier *Shoho*.

With this information, Fletcher got nervous. He feared that he would get engaged by Japanese carriers and be unable to stop the Port Moresby group. Accordingly, he thought, he would have to detach forces. Crace's cruisers were chosen, and by early morning on May 7th, left the circle of protection around the carriers and headed north toward the Louisiades. Fletcher's decision is odd; he violated the main principle of warfare, massing of force against a seperated enemy. Crace's ships would have made the defense of his carriers easier; if the carriers were destroyed, as Fletcher feared could happen, Crace's cruisers would stand a chance neither. Crace got lucky; successfully evading damage from repeated high-level bomber attacks, he turned

back to Australia after receiving reports that the Port Moresby group had abandoned its mission, upon its escort force having been hit by planes.

But anyway, the battle proceeded. It seemed the early morning had seen a change in fortunes for the Japanese. Launched earlier that day, a search plane radioed back a sighting report. "A carrier and a cruiser" were supposed to have been found on 0730 hours. Takagi, thinking this to be his chance, ordered an all-out attack. When the planes appeared overhead their target at 1038, however, disappointment spread. The ships were identified wrongly - actually it was the oiler *Neosho*, a Pearl Harbor veteran, and the destroyer *Sims*. While some of the planes continued to search for more valuable targets, in the final effect the whole load of two carriers struck the two ships. After fighting for two and a half hours, three bombs ended *Sims*' wartime career, and several more put *Neosho* out. The tanker was sunk several days later by a U.S. destroyer.

At about the same time, planes from *Yorktown* were scouting forward of the US forces, and hit the Support Force of Rear-Admiral Goto. Wrongly identifying the group as containing two carriers, the report triggered Fletcher into action, and attack planes found the group at tenhundred hours, off guard. *Shoho* had sent fighters to support the Port Moresby force, and was unable to put up a proper defense. Ninety-two planes swooped down on her, delivering thirteen bombs and seven torpedoes into the small carrier. Half an hour after the attack had begun, Fletcher on *Yorktown* received the famous message, "Scratch one flattop", issued by Lt.Cmdr.R.E.Dixon. The rest of the Port Moresby groups returned to Rabaul.

Fletcher meanwhile decided that the destruction or interdiction of the Port Moresby group was the prime goal, and set off toward the *Louisiades* again. Takagi turned his planes around after their landing, hoping to find the U.S. carriers. Luck was not with the Japanese aviators. Bad weather made for visibility measured in only a few kilometers, and again, the close proximity of both forces made for interesting situations. Heading back for their carriers rather late in the evening (having only been launched at 1630 hours), they ran into the US carriers, and their air units. Nine bombers fell while two Wildcats did the same, and the day was not yet over for the Japanese. Finding a carrier at the edge of their fuel supply, several planes descended.



*"Scratch one flattop!": Shoho burning fiercely, not much short of sinking.*

Shortly before touchdown, however, the Stars and Stripes marked the carrier as an American. Without bombs, or torpedoes, all dumped to save fuel, the Japanese could not do anything about the carriers. However, the equally surprised Americans were only able to account for one plane. Only seven of twenty-seven planes made it back to the Japanese flattops.

Eighth May, 1942, would be marked in history as the first day of carrier-vs.-carrier battle. The day began as the last four had as well. Both sides launched search planes, but this time, both sides would find what they searched for. Eighteen planes from *Lexington* shot into the skies, and only an hour after the planes had launched, the Japanese carriers were sighted. Admiral Fletcher ordered an all-out strike again, and by 0915, 82 planes were on their way.

Fletcher had due reason to be worried, however. *Lexington* had intercepted radio traffic from a search plane, and knew he had been found. His force was in bright sunshine. Takagi had had his planes in the air since 0915 as well, and his attack planes were already spreading to search for their foes when the message came in. Shortly later, 69 planes were headed toward the U.S. forces. It was the U.S. however to strike first. *Yorktown*'s 39 planes found their targets at 1050, and proceeded to attack. However, their attack was not

timed well. Dive-bombers had to circle uselessly to wait for torpedo-planes, a fact which allowed *Zuikaku* to escape into a rain squall, and *Shokaku* to strengthen her air defense groups. When the attack finally began, *Yorktown's* planes hit twice with bombs, severely damaging *Shokaku's* bow and denying her air-operations, and destroying her plane-engine shops. *Lexington's* following strike, numerically reduced by a lack of fuel, did no damage at all, despite scoring a bomb hit. On the other side, three Wildcats fell in the defense of their bombers. *Shokaku* was dropped from the battle, but her launch capability was renewed, and forty-two of her planes landed on *Zuikaku*.

At the very moment the dive-bombers descended on *Shokaku*, Japanese planes struck with deadly force at the US fleet. The Japanese had all the advantages they needed: a good composition in their strike, and extremely deadly ordnance. Their sharp swords were soon at *Lexington*. Her fighter protection out of place, the carrier saw itself confronted with a deadly "anvil-attack" scheme: from both sides, and a 45 degree angle forward, torpedo-planes came in. Twenty-three Dauntless dive-bombers caught four torpedo-planes, at the cost of four of their own to Zeros, and had not helped: *Lexington* ran into two torpedoes, and her inadequate maneuverability made the maneuvers her younger compatriot executed impossible for her: only luck prevented more than two bombs from hitting her. Her smokestack destroyed, her hull flooding, and a battery of her flak destroyed, she burned furiously in her interior. *Yorktown* had her design to help her: smaller and more maneuverable, she evaded eight of eight torpedoes launched on her, and Captain Elliott Buckmaster did his best to help against the bombs, with some successes. Only one bomb hit, causing casualties but no severe damage.

When the Japanese planes headed back to their carriers, both US flattops were swimming, and both looked good. *Lexington* had seven degrees port list, but that was repaired by moving around the fuel to the starboard side, and the fires were extinguished rapidly.

By 1247 however, a huge explosion rocked the ship from deep below. More explosions occurred, but with her steady 25 knots, *Lexington* looked salvagable, and Captain Frederick C. Sherman was still in good hope of saving his hip. Soon, however, more explosions occurred. Connections to vital areas were severed, and several more fires rose in the ship, soon to go out-of-control. When the fires reached vital - potentially deadly - areas, including bomb and torpedo storage, Sherman ordered all hands abandon ship, at 1707 hours. USS *Phelps* torpedoed the carrier, dubbed the "Lady Lex" by it's crew, and at 2000 hours, she cut under the waves of the grey-blue Coral Sea - America's first carrier had been lost.

The aftermath was quickly decided. Having *Yorktown* patched together and ready for action, Fletcher awaited the Port Moresby group, or a new carrier battle, but neither *Zuikaku* nor *Shokaku* were battle worthy, and both retired northward. *Yorktown* was soon recalled by Nimitz to Pearl Harbor, arriving there for quick repairs.

In brackets, after-battle condition.

Japanese Forces	United States Forces
<b>Strike Force (Vice-Admiral Takagi):</b> CV <i>Shokaku</i> (O) CV <i>Zuikaku</i> (Airgroup depleted!) CA <i>Myoko</i> CA <i>Haguro</i> 6 destroyers	<b>Task Force 17 (Rear-Admiral Fletcher):</b> CV-5 <i>Yorktown</i> (O) CV-2 <i>Lexington</i> (+) CA-36 <i>Minneapolis</i> CA-32 <i>New Orleans</i> CA-34 <i>Astoria</i>

<b>Support Force (Rear-Admiral Goto):</b> CVL Shoho (+) CA Aoba CA Furutaka CA Kako CA Kinugasa One destroyer	CA-27 Chester CA Australia CA-29 Chicago CA-33 Portland CL Hobart Eleven destroyers
In support of the Port Moresby group were three light cruisers and five destroyers, plus small crafts, the Tulagi Group had two DDs (+).	<b>Fleet Train:</b> AO Neosho (+) AO Tippecanoe Two destroyers (+)

For a detailed bibliography, see here.

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**with the assistance of Floyd Mack**