

ADDRESS BY  
HIS EXCELLENCY MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL JEFFERY AC CVO MC  
**GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA**  
ON THE OCCASION OF  
**SERVICE OF COMMEMORATION OF THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA**  
AUSTRALIAN-AMERICAN MEMORIAL, FIELD MARSHAL SIR THOMAS BLAMEY SQUARE,  
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The recent discovery of HMAS SYDNEY after more than 66 years - with so many lives lost, so many grieving families - has been a poignant reminder, if one were needed, of the significance of Australian and United States naval operations in the Second World War.

You will recall that in 1941, Australian divisions, fighter squadrons and naval units were in the Middle East helping to stem the march of German Nazism and Italian Fascism.

Little thought or preparation had been given to the possibility of a serious threat to the South-West Pacific. But it came, and very quickly.

In the first four months of 1942 a series of tumultuous events occurred, including:

- . bombing raids on Darwin, Derby and Broome;
- . the sinking of two of the Royal Navy's capital ships, Repulse and Prince of Wales, off Singapore;
- . the capture of Malaya and Hong Kong; and
- . the fall of "Fortress Singapore".

HMAS PERTH and ships of the British, Dutch and American navies, were lost against overwhelming Japanese naval firepower in the Battles of the Sunda Strait and Java Sea.

The Imperial Japanese Army then swept through the Dutch East Indies, Timor and the Solomons, New Britain and the northern coast of New Guinea.

Corregidor, the last US bastion in the Philippines, then fell.

Tens of thousands of badly needed Australian, British and American soldiers, sailors and airmen were taken into brutal captivity in South East Asia, including the whole of our 8th Division.

Whilst these events were unfolding, Australia's and New Zealand's battle-trained divisions and much of our air forces were still far from home, fighting in North Africa. These were the most perilous months in the history of Australia, and the people who lived through them still remember how vulnerable they felt. They have never forgotten their personal anxiety and the national mood of grim foreboding.

Australians feared invasion of our undermanned and ill-prepared island continent - and I clearly remember, as a young boy, the construction and provisioning of an air-raid shelter in my family's own backyard in Perth.

We now know that seizure of Australia was not planned by the Japanese High Command - it would have been too expensive in ships, men and aircraft.

But, of course, we now have the benefit of hindsight. At the time, invasion seemed both feasible and imminent.

We now know that the Japanese High Command planned an isolating blockade of Australia instead. We would have been effectively driven out of the war, our vital exports denied to our allies and our imports controlled or cut off by Japan.

There seemed pitifully little Australia alone could throw into a battle to oppose the Japanese Navy and its plans for oceanic control.

The Royal Australian Navy was little more than a small cruiser squadron, recently depleted by the sinking of the cruisers Perth and Sydney.

Our Navy was designed to operate with the Royal Navy's Far East Fleet based in Singapore, but that strategy lay in ruins with the fall of that supposed island fortress.

The reality was that Australia needed a great and powerful friend. And - equally at that pivotal moment - that great and powerful friend, the United States, needed Australia, both as a base and a springboard back into the Pacific.

But before the spring forward could be contemplated, Japan's drive to occupy Port Moresby and its important airfield had to be stopped.

The Battle of the Coral Sea did just that.

It prevented the direct assault on Port Moresby, it bought time, it kept open the northern sea lanes, and it made possible the successful defence of the Kokoda track, Milne Bay and the eventual recapture of New Guinea.

Also, without a Japanese naval and air base at Port Moresby, air strikes by the Imperial Navy against eastern Australia and its shipping lanes were not sustainable.

And so it was just a few weeks after Coral Sea that the Australians would inflict the first defeat of the war on the Japanese at Milne Bay, the Americans would land on Guadalcanal, and the Japanese would eventually be driven out of the Solomons.

The Japanese plan to seize Samoa and Fiji and turn the Western Pacific into part of the "Japanese Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere" was thus to be thwarted.

There would be no more expansion, or new bases, or victories for Japan after the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Coral Sea occurred on 7-8 May 1942, and the RAN's cruisers - Australia and Hobart - were involved.

United States Rear Admirals Fletcher and Fitch and their navy carrier pilots fought the first ever over the horizon carrier battle in history.

Tactically the battle was a draw, but strategically it was a comprehensive victory, because the Japanese Port Moresby invasion force - scheduled to land on 10 May - turned back.

And although both fleets withdrew simultaneously from the engagement, crucially, the Japanese had two fleet carriers too badly damaged to be available for that pivotal battle for sea control one month later - the Battle of Midway, which put paid to Admiral Yamamoto's plan to wipe out the American fleet before America's overwhelming manpower and industrial might could be brought to bear against the thinly stretched Japanese garrisons in the Pacific.

Midway denied Japan that victory, and Coral Sea was the essential precursor.

A heavy price was paid for the strategic success of the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Five hundred and forty three American sailors and navy pilots were killed in action.

The Imperial Navy sank one American fleet carrier, the USS Lexington, and badly damaged another, the USS Yorktown.

It also sank an oiler and a destroyer.

The Japanese lost one light carrier and a large number of planes and pilots.

But it was the serious damage done to the two Japanese large fleet carriers that mattered most.

They needed repairs, which kept them both out of the war for several months.

Crucially, they were not available at Midway.

Had they been present, the chance of American victory would have been greatly reduced - with incalculable consequences for the war in the Pacific.

In essence, the Battle of the Coral Sea meant the end of Japanese expansion southward.

Japan could never again threaten Australia and New Zealand with blockade or invasion, although three more years of hard island fighting lay ahead, with our capacity to deploy and resupply our forces in the Pacific essentially won by the US Navy and its pilots, supported by the RAN.

Further, the vital sea routes to the US and the UK remained open, and Australia became the critical launching pad for future victory in the Pacific.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Today, the people of Australia remember with gratitude and pride the courage shown and the sacrifices made at the Battle of the Coral Sea.

No greater proof of friendship was ever displayed than through the immense support given by the American people to we Australians - particularly during our months of peril in 1942 and, afterwards, through the hard-fought Pacific Island campaign.

Today, in front of this impressive memorial, we take heart and resolution from the memory of common dangers faced and overcome, so that our two peoples might continue to live and prosper in peace.

We should never forget.

Thank you.