# The BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA: A LASTING LEGACY

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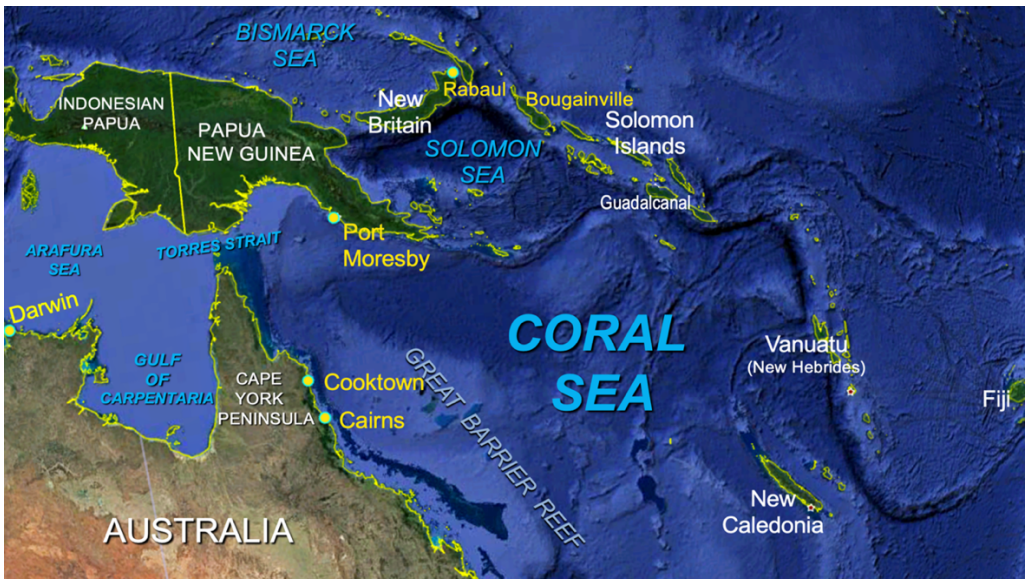
The importance of the Battle of the Coral Sea, May 4-8, 1942, is often underestimated and has been traditionally overshadowed by the Battle of Midway one month later. In this review of the events and the outcome of this pivotal naval and air engagement just northeast of Australia, I'll make the case that it was the key inflection point in the Pacific War and was a gamechanger with a lasting legacy that set the stage for the momentous Allied victory at Midway, saved Australia from a strangling isolation or worse, and changed naval warfare forever.




**Strategic Background**: The Battle of the Coral Sea (BCS) can be seen as a keystone in the New Guinea Campaign, the longest and arguably most grueling battlefront in the Pacific War. The core goal of the New Guinea Campaign was to thwart the Japanese invasion of Port Moresby, neutralize the major Japanese airbase at Rabaul on New Britain in the Bismarcks, and secure New Guinea as a springboard for eventual Allied advances to the Philippines and the Japanese home islands.

## Timeline of the Allied NEW GUINEA CAMPAIGN

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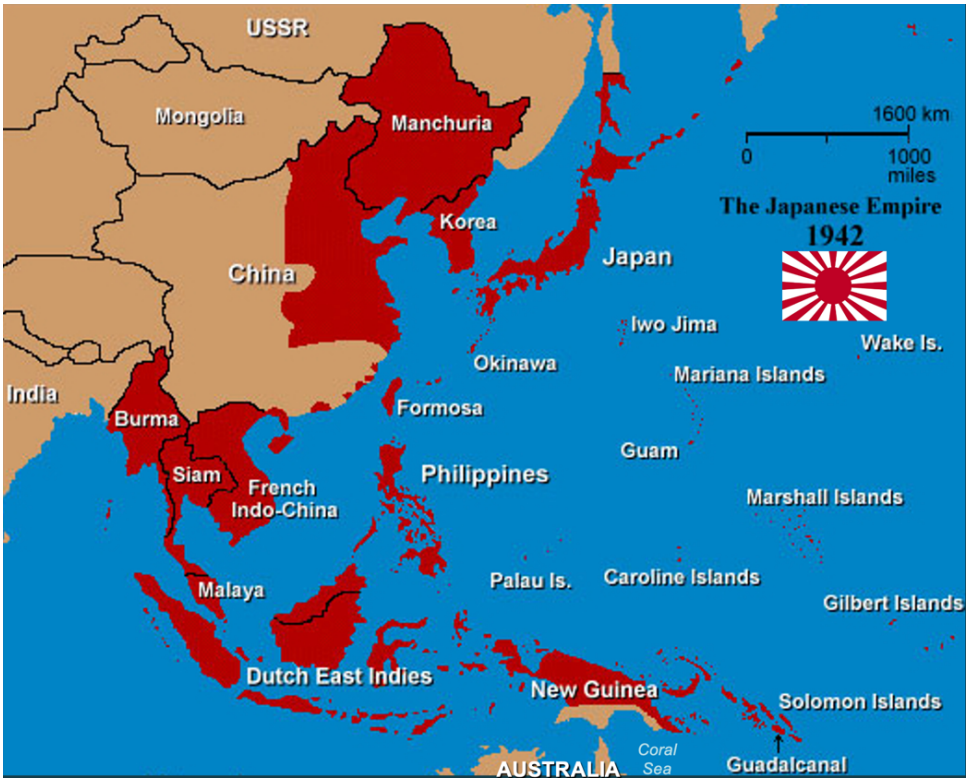
| Jan '42 | Japanese capture Rabaul on New Britain from Aussies, build major naval and air base |
| Feb 19 '42 | Japanese bomb Darwin – 236 killed, 400 wounded |
| Mar '42 | Japanese overrun Dutch NG & Lae in Australian NG - goal is to take Port Moresby |
| May '42 | BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA – JAPANESE ASSAULT ON P.M. THWARTED |
| Aug '42 | Japanese take Buna in preparation for Kokoda Track overland campaign to Port Moresby |
| Jul-Nov '42 | KOKODA TRACK CAMPAIGN – Japanese push to 20 mi N of PM- Aussies drive them back |
| Aug - Sep '42 | BATTLE OF MILNE BAY– FIRST LAND DEFEAT OF JAPANESE TROOPS |
| Nov 42-Jan '43 | BATTLE OF BUNA- Allies take Buna from Japanese |
| Jan 29-31 '43 | Japanese attack Australian base at WAU – Allies (mostly Aussies) defeat the attack force |
| Feb '43 | Japanese abandon Guadalcanal in Solomons after 6 months of brutal warfare |
| Mar '43 | 2nd Japanese attack on Wau fails; Allies rout Japanese in BATTLE OF BISMARCK SEA |
| April '43 | Japanese airstrikes bomb Port Moresby– costs exceed benefits for Japan<br>Yamamoto is tracked and killed when his plane is shot down over Bougainville |
| Nov-May '43 | Allied offensive against Japanese bases in Rabaul → RABAUL NEUTRALIZED |
| May-Aug '44 | BATTLE OF BIAK ISLAND → Allies take Hollandia, capital of Dutch New Guinea |
| Sept '44 | Japanese effectively neutralized in New Guinea; MacArthur moves his office to Hollandia |
| Oct 20 '44 | Allied Philippine Campaign begins with Leyte Gulf assault – Manila taken by Feb '45 |
| Aug 15 '45 | Japan surrenders, New Guinea returns to its Allied hegemons, Netherlands & Australia |

The Japanese had embarked on a rapacious campaign of conquest beginning within hours of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, much of Dutch Indonesia including Java and Bali, much of New Guinea, Borneo, most of the Philippines, Wake Island, Guam, Tarawa and Makin in the Gilberts, Rabaul and other parts of the Bismarck Archipelago, Portuguese Timor, Rangoon and Mandalay in Burma - all fell to the seemingly invincible Japanese as they swept across SE Asia and the Pacific largely unchecked. With the bombing of Darwin on February 19, 1942, the Japanese made it clear that they intended to at neutralize Australia to protect their Empire's southern perimeter at all costs. To this end, Japan's Fleet Commander Admiral Yamamoto planned a seaborn invasion of Port Moresby on the southern coast of New Guinea, which could then serve as a key staging point for both defense of their perimeter and attacks on Australia and beyond. They planned a combined assault on Port Moresby, codenamed Operation MO, along with a push east into British-controlled Fiji and New Zealand-controlled Western Samoa which was codenamed Operation FS. These seaborn invasions would be supported by two large fleet carriers, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, which were screened by heavy cruisers and the light carrier *Shōhō.* On May 3, 1942, one day before the planned seaborn assault on Port Moresby, the Japanese occupied Tulagi, a small island off of Guadalcanal in the Solomons, to serve as a forward airbase.

But the entire operation was compromised before it began when American codebreakers in Hawaii and Melbourne decrypted Japanese messages and became aware of the preparations and plan. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief of The Pacific Fleet, immediately dispatched two carrier task forces to the Coral Sea. The huge value of Allied codebreaking expertise would be one of the key lessons of the BCS that would reverberate and pay dividends throughout the war and in particular at Midway, where Japan lost the advantage of surprise thanks to Allied codebreakers.

Nimitz sent Task Force 17 with the fleet carrier USS Yorktown and escorting cruisers and destroyers and Task Force 11 with fleet carrier USS Lexington ('Lady Lex'). They would be joined by a third task force TF 44 of Australian and Allied cruisers. This force gave the Allies, for the first time in the war, rough parity in carrier air power against Japan. As Yamamoto had feared, "the sleeping giant was awakening."



The BCS began on May 4 when Yorktown's air group struck the new Japanese airbase at Tulagi, sinking a destroyer and several small ships and damaging other vessels, with light American losses. Yorktown then moved south on May 5 to join Lady Lex in pursuit of the Japanese fleet. The opposing fleets sent airborne scouts to try to find and attack each other on May 6-7. Weather initially favored the Japanese as their fleet was under cloud cover whilst the Allied fleet sailed under clear skies. The Japanese sighted and sank two American ships on the morning of May 7, Neosho (an oil supply ship aka 'oiler' named after the Neosho River in Kansas and Oklahoma) and Sims, a destroyer. That afternoon, American scouts located the Japanese light carrier *Shoho* and sank her with torpedoes and bombs - the first Japanese carrier lost in the war. That evening, a Japanese strike force of 27 planes found the American carriers, but dusk and a brisk American defense prevented them from inflicting any significant damage.

On the morning of May 8, both carrier forces found each other in the Coral Sea about 500 mi/800 km northeast of Cairns, and the main battle began. It was the first naval battle in history in which the opposing ships never sighted each other and all attacks were aerial, carried out by carrier-based aircraft. 70 Japanese aircraft attacked Lexington and Yorktown. 82 American aircraft struck *Shōkaku* and *Zuikaku*. The Japanese scored first and hardest. Lexington was hit hard and incapacitated by 2 bombs and 2 torpedoes. Yorktown took one bomb that damaged her flight deck but did not stop operations. Lexington appeared to stabilize, but internal gasoline vapor explosions hours later forced her abandonment and eventual scuttling—she became the first U.S. fleet carrier lost in the war. American dive bombers from Yorktown and Lexington severely damaged *Shōkaku* with three bomb hits, forcing her to retire. She would miss the Midway battle largely due to Japanese perfectionism which prevented her from being put back into service even when she had undergone major repairs and was seaworthy and adequately battle-ready. Yorktown on the other hand was very rapidly repaired in Pearl Harbor to a sufficiently functional state - and Nimitz ordered her hurried to Midway where she played a key role in the Allied victory. *Zuikaku* escaped serious damage but lost so many aircraft and experienced aircrew that she was out of action for the coming Midway operation - again largely due to strategically misguided Japanese perfectionism because she could have sailed with a partially restored complement of aircraft and crew.

Who won? In strict technical terms, **most military historians consider the Japanese to have achieved a tactical victory**, with significantly greater tonnage destruction of American assets: Fleet carrier Lexington sunk, oiler Neosho, and destroyer Sims sunk. But the Japanese were far from unscathed: Fleet carrier *Shōkaku* was heavily damaged, Fleet carrier *Zuikaku*'s air groups were decimated, and 1 destroyer and several smaller ships were sunk.




But by other measures the scales tip the other way tactically: The Allies lost 66 aircraft and 543 combatants, whilst the Japanese lost 92 aircraft and 1,074 men. Some military historians use these data to suggest the BCS was 'tactically inconclusive'.

But **from a strategic standpoint, the BCS was indisputably a major Allied victory**, in the following significant ways:

**1)** It prevented the Japanese invasion of Port Moresby which had enormous implications including saving Australia from attack, blockade, and possible invasion - the Aussies have never forgotten this. The failure of the invasion plan also led the Japanese to commit enormous resources for the next 3 years to taking Port Moresby overland from the north - a mostly suicidal jungle highland campaign which cost them many lives and resources that they could have used elsewhere.

**2)** This was the first time Japanese momentum was stopped. Japan's *Nanshin-ron* 'Southward Advance' was checked for the first time. It was also the first time Allied competence and firepower were decisively demonstrated (the same had not been the case in failed Allied naval defense operations of the oil fields of Dutch Indonesia). This represented not only a key inflection point in the Pacific War - the tide would soon turn - but also a huge boon for Allied morale.

**3)** The taking out of *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* from Midway lessened Japan's numerical carrier advantage at Midway (4:3) and contributed to Japan's defeat in that battle a month later.

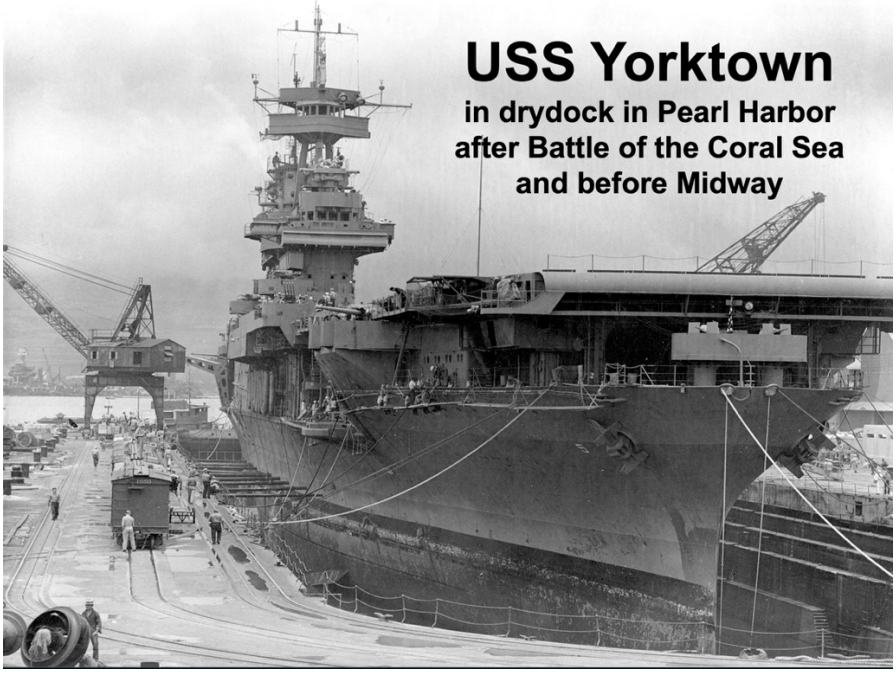
**4)** Lessons learned in the science and art and utility of codebreaking would give the Allies a dramatic advantage for the rest of the war.

**5)** Lessons learned in carrier warfare (*e.g.*, on-ship command vs. command from afar by radio) and the establishment of carrier warfare as the major mode of naval warfare from the BCS onward would give the Allies a distinct advantage and played a key role in turning the tide of the Pacific War. It was almost all downhill for the Japanese after the BCS. The USA's prodigious industrial light would produce more and superior carriers and planes that would play a decisive role in the retribution and defeat that Japan would suffer.

**6)** Use of the new technology of radar, which had failed miserably at Pearl Harbor, played a key role in the BCS and the Allies would leverage their advantage in this technology for the rest of the war.

**7)** The BCS delayed Japan's assault on the Solomons, buying time for an Allied build-up which contributed to the Allied victory at Guadalcanal, the Allies' first major offensive victory and another blow to Japanese designs on Australia.

Yorktown's quick 'emergency repair' (72 hours!) at Pearl Harbor proved critically important. She fought heroically in the Battle of Midway (June 4-7, 1942), playing a key role in the sinking of Japan's carriers *Akagi* and *Soryu* which helped seal the Allied victory. But she took punishing blows in the battle and sank to the ocean floor at 0500 on June 7, 1942. She has one of the most impressive combat records in history. Her wreck was found off Midway by Robert Ballard of Titanic fame in 1988 during a joint US Navy-National Geographic Expedition, 3 mi/5 km deep in the Pacific. It remains a protected gravesite today.




In all of the above ways the Battle of the Coral Sea was a gamechanger and an often underappreciated turning point with an undeniable lasting legacy.