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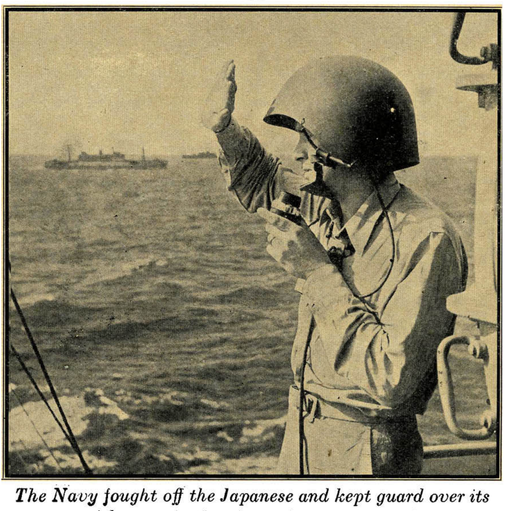
Coral Sea Blow and Gas Threat Portend Allied Might in 1942



The Navy fought off the Japanese and kept guard over its convoys (the man in the picture is receiving an intership message)

Japanese Pacific Advance Stalled by U. S. Naval Victory

For the first time in this war the Japanese and American Navies came to grips in a major action last week. They met in alien waters, in the shimmering expanse of the Coral Sea, far from the home waves where the fleets grew up. The Americans were nurtured on the rough seas of the North Atlantic and the broad expanses of the Eastern Pacific. The Japanese learned their seamanship in the misty straits and swift currents around their own rocky islands.

It was a bright May morning when the Japanese squadron sailed from its bases near Rabaul, through the reef-lined passages and past the palm-fringed Solomon Islands. It was not the main battle fleet but it did include aircraft carriers, heavy and light cruisers, destroyers and supply ships—apparently a task force charged with preparing the way for another Japanese move south. It was manned by sailors brought up in the tradition of a fighting navy that had never lost a battle.

The American squadron came up into the sunlit Coral Sea from the south. From all indications it was the task force under the command of Vice Admiral Herbert Fairfax Leary that had earlier been attached to the Southwest Pacific Command of General MacArthur. It too was manned by sailors raised in a fighting tradition and one that reached back into the days when Japan was only a somnolent island kingdom—back to Stephen Decatur and John Paul Jones.

In the center of the Coral Sea the two task forces met in mortal struggle. It was like no other naval battle ever seen. Land bombers of the American Air Force opened the attack. More planes joined in the fray—torpedo bombers, dive bombers, level bombers, and the daring little pursuit planes—some 500 of them all told.

First the American forces hit the light screening vessels of the Japanese. Down went a heavy cruiser, a light cruiser, one destroyer, and four gunboats. Then the

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main bodies closed in with the Americans pressing the fight. Bombers struck at the Japanese aircraft carriers, sank one, and set the other afire from stem to stern. Cameras in the planes provided an eyewitness account of the battle and a Melbourne broadcast told what they recorded:

"One astounding photograph shows six Japanese warships, including the two doomed aircraft carriers, weaving a pattern of white circles against the background of deep, blue sea, each Japanese ship dodging American bombs in different directions, each frantically attempting to escape destruction. The speed at which the Japanese ships are traveling in their effort to avoid the Allied planes is shown by the huge white wakes of foam, almost as large as the ships themselves, which they are trailing behind them."

The result was victory for the American force—a victory made doubly sweet by many months of bitter defeats. The Japanese, according to Allied communiqués, lost seventeen ships sunk or damaged—two aircraft carriers, two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, a seaplane tender, two destroyers, four gunboats, and four supply ships. Tokyo claimed to have sunk two American aircraft carriers plus an American and a British battleship. The Axis story was promptly blasted by triple-barreled denials from London, Washington, and General MacArthur's headquarters.

It was victory all right—but it was not as decisive as it sounded to a jubilant America. For in the north in the mandated islands the main Japanese Fleet still stood ready for action at any moment—a fleet as yet largely unscathed, a fleet that has always come back for more, a fleet that does not like the taste of defeat.

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THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

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THE Jap was the first to make full use of the airplane carrier in surprise attack. Yet at Pearl Harbor he had not sunk a single carrier, and now our Navy was beginning to use carriers against him.

In March, carrier-based planes blasted Jap ship concentrations in the harbors of Lae and Salamaua. Then, early in May, a Jap attack armada was known to be moving from Truk, one part straight south toward the Louisiades, the other in a great southeastward loop which would enable it to pick up a transport force concentrating in Tulagi Harbor on Florida Island in the Solomons. The probable point of attack for this huge force was Port Moresby, or perhaps Australia.

An American force, the carriers *Yorktown* and *Lexington* with protecting fleet, on patrol in the Coral Sea, spotted the transport force concentrating in Tulagi, on May 3. Between the carrier force and the enemy when the scout planes first radioed lay the Island of Guadalcanal, 70 miles long, 50 miles wide, its mountains rising to peaks of 6,000 feet.

It was natural to suppose that the Jap in Tulagi would be expecting attack from carrier-based planes. But he probably would expect such an everyone was at battle stations before dawn the morning of May 4 as the great ship turned into the wind to launch its planes for the 120-mile race to Tulagi.

The first attack planes zoomed off at 06:15, relays of bombers and torpedo planes shooting after. Scouts spread over every section of territory but Tulagi. The same night that hid the

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approach of *Lexington* might also have hidden a Jap carrier.

The scouts were back with the bombers by the time they approached Tulagi, the first rays of the sun flashing from their wings as they rushed over jungles toward the peaks of the island. Over the mountains, torpedo planes pushed noses down in a dive which took them to water level for the final 12 miles to the harbor.

They arrived there just as the bombers began their dives overhead, and to the pilots it seemed the harbor was full of naval craft. The largest transport, three cruisers and four destroyers were marked for the first attack.

The Jap got his first warning from the high-pitched roar of the first bomber dive. At the same time, torpedoes from the fanned-out torpedo planes began to leave white wakes which criss-crossed all sections of the harbor.

Huge flames licked into the air as a destroyer listed under the impact of two bombs. Torpedo explosions sent smaller craft into the air and shattered the light auxiliary vessels to splinters. A 20,000-ton troopship went down; 1,000-lb. bombs plunged into the decks of a heavy cruiser; two destroyers turned over and sank; a seaplane tender was hit but sneaked out of the harbor, trailing oil; another destroyer and a couple of supply ships went down. But still the pilots were not satisfied. They headed back for another load of bombs.

The Jap had rallied sufficiently to shoot anti-attack only from the direction of the sea. It might be possible to attack over Guadalcanal and catch him by surprise.

From this idea the Navy strategy developed. In one night it would be possible for *Lexington* to run in close to the rear of Guadalcanal and at dawn send its planes sweeping over Tulagi. *Yorktown* would protect the rear and supply any necessary reinforcements. Aboard *Lexington* aircraft fire at the flyers who returned, and there was seaplane-fighter interference. But it was too late for the Jap to save much. Some of the planes from *Lexington* fanned out after crossing the mountains, and out at sea chased down ships that escaped the harbor. A cruiser and a transport were sneaking out just as they arrived. The planes dived and their bombs hit.

The third time only bombers came over. They found a damaged destroyer outside the harbor and sank her; then they dive-bombed the damaged ships inside. At a height of 50 feet they tore in and out, trying to find targets for the rest of the bomb load. There didn't seem to be any.

At sea one destroyer was making off under forced draft. Planes found her, systematically shot her up and left her wallowing, steam and smoke pouring from her hatches and oil pouring from ragged holes in her hull.

Back at *Lexington* they added up the score of the first round: Fourteen out of 15 Jap ships sunk or damaged. Our losses: three planes, one crew.

That night *Lexington* was far from Guadalcanal, refueling with the rest of the force. Next morning they were pushing up into the Coral Sea where army bombers had found an enemy fleet in the Louisiades. In the afternoon scouts reported a large enemy force heading south by east. The carriers turned and raced through the night.

At dawn reconaissance showed the Jap had split his force. North, toward Misima, was a force of one carrier, three cruisers and six destroyers. The *Lexington* planes found the force just as the Jap carrier was turning to the wind.

The day was May 7—five months to the day after Pearl Harbor. Every plane scored a hit on the Jap carrier, which went down in five minutes. It was the new Jap carrier, *Ryukaku*.

At night the weather turned bad. Squalls, wind, clouds swept around the carriers as word came through that there was a Jap armada only 30 miles away. This was a new force and a big one — at least two carriers, battleships and destroyers.

Lexington and *Yorktown* let go their full attack in the dawn. Through the swirling clouds and driving rain the carrier *Zuikaku* was found and left afire. Through other clouds her sister ship loomed up. The carrier *Shokaku* was hit with two 1,000-pounders and the torpedo planes sank five fish in her.

As these planes attacked, the Jap was concentrating on *Lexington* and *Yorktown* in great force. *Yorktown* got a bomb but repaired the damage by night. *Lexington* picked up three bombs and two torpedoes, all on the port side. Listing, she limped away, got the damage down and the fires under control. But her gasoline pipes were sprung. In the evening the fumes exploded and finished her.

Exactly what happened to the two-pronged Jap attack force no one knows. None of the fleets was found again. It is safe to say they ran for home.

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