



“The maintenance of the maritime well-being of the nation”

is the principal objective of the Navy League of Australia

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## **BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA COMMEMORATION** **12 YEARS ON**

With the month of May now almost upon us, and with thoughts of naval history in mind, it would seem appropriate to recall the “Battle of the Coral Sea”, the battle fought by US and Australian forces against the Japanese navy 72 years ago from the fourth to the eighth of May 1942.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was the first naval battle in history where opposing fleets were never in visual contact.

This battle was the turning point of the Japanese naval threat against the allies, certainly the turning point for the defeat of the Japanese by US naval forces some four weeks later at the Battle of Midway.

Whilst the battle of the coral sea was very much a United States Navy engagement in terms of the number of ships, including two aircraft carriers, and the manpower involved, led by Rear Admiral “Fighting” Frank Fletcher USN, let us not forget that part of this allied fleet, including US Navy ships together with the RAN’S HMA ships AUSTRALIA and HOBART, was under the command of the Senior Seagoing Commander serving with the RAN Australian born and bred Rear Admiral Jack Crace RN, a fact perhaps not completely forgotten, but sometimes overlooked.

A brief overview of the Battle of the Coral Sea reveals the following:-

By April 1942 the Japanese had formed a defensive perimeter, which stretched from the Kurites southward through the Marshall Islands to New Britain, then westwards to Java, Sumatra, the Andaman Islands, and Burma. Within that perimeter Japanese authority was – or soon would be – unchallenged and every strategic position was occupied. In the South-West Pacific area outposts were held at Lae and Salamaua in Northern New Guinea.

The Doolittle raid on Tokyo stirred the Japanese to extend the perimeter and cut communications between Australia and the United States. Operations were mounted to capture Tulagi in the Solomon's and Port Moresby in New Guinea. These operations were to be covered by a force built around the large carriers SHOKAKU and ZUIKAKU. The Japanese plans were uncovered by signals intelligence and the allies countered with a force built around the carriers YORKTOWN and LEXINGTON. Included in this force were the Australian Cruisers AUSTRALIA and HOBART. In May these ships were detached to guard against the Port Moresby invasion force. They were unsuccessfully attacked by Japanese aircraft. In the event the invasion force turned back after losses to US air attacks. Meanwhile the two opposing carrier forces fought a battle in which LEXINGTON was lost and YORKTOWN, ZULKAKU and SHOKAKU were heavily damaged.

The battle of the Coral Sea represented the first occasion on which Japanese naval forces, enjoying an unbroken run of successes since the start of the Pacific War in December 1941, experienced the failure of a major operation. The massed-carrier action fought in mid Pacific off Midway Island a month later was to prove strategically more decisive, entailing losses by Japan which effectively ended that country's hopes of establishing total dominance over US naval strength in the Pacific, but this in no way diminishes the fact that it was at the Coral Sea that Japanese ambitions were first blunted, and the foundations for the Midway victory laid.

Some historians are quoted as describing the outcome of the battle of the Coral Sea as tactically a draw, but in real terms strategically it was a victory for the allies. Port Moresby was never again directly threatened by seaborne invasion;

No enemy fleet ever again ventured so far south into the Coral Sea and the two damaged enemy aircraft carriers were unable to be repaired in time to take part in the battle that stopped Japan's seaborne advance in its tracks: Midway.

With all of these thoughts in mind it took me back to my youth as a young lad standing on the pier at Port Melbourne watching the arrival of the first U.S. Navy ships to visit Melbourne since the end of World War 2.

Contrary to one of our history books, the first visitors were not the five U.S. Navy ships visiting Melbourne to represent their country at the 1956 Olympic Games, it was two U.S. Navy ships here to take part in commemorative services in honour of the U.S. and Australian servicemen engaged in the action that took place off Queensland's North East Coast, just 12 years prior, the "Battle of the Coral Sea".

The first U.S. Navy post-war visitors to Melbourne were the U.S.S. Tarawa and U.S.S. O'Bannon. Both ships arrived at Port Melbourne during early May of 1954.

The aircraft carrier U.S.S. Tarawa, CVA40, an Essex Class Ticonderoga type carrier commissioned 8<sup>th</sup> December 1945, too late to serve in World War 2, recommissioned soon after the Korean War began and served in the Atlantic as a replacement for carriers sent to the Korean conflict.

U.S.S. Tarawa's main characteristics are detailed in the following:-

LENGTH	888	feet
BEAM	93	feet
DISPLACEMENT	27,100	tons
DRAFT	29	feet
SPEED	33	knots
COMPLEMENT	3,448	
AIRCRAFT	100	

U.S.S. Tarawa was sold for scrap in 1968.

U.S.S. Tarawa's escort for her Melbourne visit, U.S.S. O'Bannon, DD 450, like so many ships of the R.A.N., had also engaged in actions during World War 2 and the Korean War period. During her later service she was also to serve in the Vietnam War.

During her service in World War 2 she participated in the battles of the Solomons, plus Hollandia, Tarakan and Leyte Gulf. In Korea U.S.S. O'Bannon engaged in shore bombardment and carrier plane guard duty and so too in Vietnam. Indeed a much decorated destroyer of the United States Navy.

The Fletcher Class destroyer U.S.S. O'Bannon, DD450 featured the following main characteristics:-

LENGTH	376	feet
BEAM	40	feet
DISPLACEMENT	2050	tons
DRAFT	18	feet
SPEED	35	knots
COMPLEMENT	330	

U.S.S. O'Bannon, commissioned first in 1942, was sold for scrap in 1970.

The first post-war visit to Melbourne in 1954 by ships of the U.S. Navy was followed by many others during the 1950's and beyond by ships also of the R.A.N during which time crew members from the visiting ships in the month of May acknowledged the "Battle of the Coral Sea" anniversaries and participated in marches and commemorative services. Many of the visiting U.S. Navy ships, destroyers of the World War 2 and Korean War period, were comprised mainly of the "Fletcher", "Allen M. Sumner" and "Gearing" classes. The total build number of these classes over the period was somewhere in the order of 330 ships.

Each following class was an improvement and an upgrade to the prior class, i.e. "Fletcher" class with five - 5 inch guns in single mounts was followed by the "Allen M. Sumner" ships with six - 5 inch guns in three twin mounts. Both classes at 376 feet in length were followed by the "Gearing" class at 390 feet in length, with the extra 14 feet utilized for fuel storage, thus providing further range.

As U.S.S. Tarawa made her way through Port Phillip Heads on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1954 for her Melbourne visit, four of the carrier's jet fighters made their presence felt as they broke the sound barrier during their flight over Melbourne.

At the same time Fleet Admiral William Frederick "Bull" Halsey's U.S. Navy plane was landing at Melbourne's Essendon Airport. Admiral Halsey U.S. Navy ret'd was the United States special guest for the 1954 "Battle of the Coral Sea" anniversary commemoration. Admiral Halsey was accompanied on his visit by the R.A.N.'s Chief of Navy Vice Admiral Sir John Collins.

Well known to Australians for his World War 2 service, as of course was VADM Collins also, Admiral Halsey was Commander of the South Pacific area and South Pacific Forces which included command of the U.S. Third Fleet. He may also be remembered for having said:-

“There are no great men, just great challenges which ordinary men, out of necessity, are forced by circumstances to meet.”

Admiral Halsey's first visit to Melbourne was in 1908 as an Ensign serving in the battleship U.S.S. Missouri which was part of Teddy Roosevelt's "Great White Fleet". The visit to Melbourne by the "Great White Fleet" was part of their circumnavigation of the globe. Upon his arrival on May 6<sup>th</sup> 1954, at Essendon Airport, Admiral Halsey was met by the Federal Minister for Labor, Mr. Holt, Victorian Premier, Mr. Cain, Service Chiefs plus representatives of the Australia-America Association.

The next day Admiral Halsey, with the Victorian Governor, Sir Dallas Brooks, took the salute in front of Melbourne's Town Hall when approximately 3,000 marchers from Australia's current services and ex-service personnel marched through Melbourne's streets to commemorate the 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Battle of the Coral Sea". Included amongst the 3,000 marchers were 750 crew members from the visiting U.S. navy ships U.S.S. Tarawa and U.S.S. O'Bannon.

As we now come back to the current period, it was heartening to notice that attendance numbers at the 2013 "Battle of the Coral Sea" commemoration service, held at the Shrine of Remembrance, were an improvement when compared to other recent years.

Victoria's Senior Naval Officer, Captain Katherine Richards, delivered a fine address at the service last year; so too did former SNO-VIC Cdre Bob Richards. Let us hope the trend continues.

Although it is highly unlikely that we will ever see numbers such as the many thousands in attendance and participating 60 years ago in the 1954 "Battle of the Coral Sea" commemoration, or for that matter the years closely following that time, nevertheless if those attending numbered in hundreds rather than thousands, it would still be a fine and fitting tribute to the officers and sailors of the United States Navy and the Royal Australian Navy who fought this battle. A fine tribute also in memory of the many hundreds of allied servicemen who made the supreme sacrifice whilst engaged in this strategic naval battle 72 years ago on Australia's doorstep, the "Battle of the Coral Sea".

Frank McCarthy  
NLA VIC DIVISION

## Membership

Any person with an interest in maritime affairs, or who wishes to acquire an interest in, or knowledge of, maritime affairs and who wishes to support the objectives of the League, is invited to join.

### OBJECTIVES

The principal objective of the Navy League of Australia is "The maintenance of the maritime well-being of the Nation" by:

- Keeping before the Australian people the fact that we are a maritime nation and that a strong Navy supported by maritime elements of the Air Force and Army and other Government Maritime agencies are indispensable elements of our national well-being and vital to the freedom of Australia.
- Promoting defence self-reliance by supporting maritime research, defence industry, Australian shipping, ship-building, port and transport infrastructure and off shore resource exploration and development.
- Promoting and encouraging the interest and training of youth in the sea.

### ACTIVITIES

The Navy League of Australia works towards its objectives in a number of ways:

- By including in its membership leading representatives of the many elements which form the maritime community.
- Through soundly-based contributions by members to journals and newspapers, and other media comment.
- By publishing *The Navy*, a quarterly journal reporting on local and overseas maritime happenings, past, present, and projected.
- By organizing symposia, ship visits and various other functions of maritime interests throughout the years.
- By supporting Australian Navy Cadets, and assisting in the provision of training facilities.

Member participation is encouraged in all these activities.

### POLICY

The policy of the League can be found at the back of *The Navy*.

## Joining the League

To become a Member of The League, you do not need to have had any previous maritime experience. You merely need an interest in maritime affairs. Simply complete the Application Form below, and post it, together with your first annual subscription of \$35.00 (which includes the four quarterly editions of The Navy), to the Hon Secretary of the Division of the Navy League in the State in which you reside, the address of which are as follows:

**New South Wales Division:** GPO Box 1719, Sydney, NSW 2001.  
**Victorian Division:** PO Box 2340, Mt Waverley, Vic 3149.  
**Queensland Division:** GPO Box 1481, Brisbane, QLD 4001.  
**South Australian Division:** PO Box 3008, Unley, SA 5061.  
**Tasmanian Division:** 40 Fleetwood Drive, Speyton, TAS 7310.  
**West Australian Division:** 3 Prosser Way, Myaree, WA 6154.

If you live in the Australian Capital Territory or the Northern Territory, please post the form to the Hon Secretary of the New South Wales or South Australian Division respectively.

Subscriptions are due on 1 July in each year, and your membership will be current to 30 June immediately following the date on which you join the League, except that if your first subscription is received during the period 1 April to 30 June in any year, your initial membership will be extended to 30 June in the following year.

<b>THE NAVY LEAGUE OF AUSTRALIA</b> <b>APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP</b>	
To: The Hon. Secretary The Navy League of Australia	
_____ Division	
I wish to join the Navy League of Australia, the objectives of which I support, and I enclose a remittance for \$35.00 (including \$3.18 GST) being my first annual subscription to 30 June next.	
Name: [ Mr ] [ Mrs ] [ Ms ] [ Rank ] _____	
_____	
<small>PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY</small>	
Street _____	
Suburb _____ State _____ P/code _____	
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Correspondence:- All articles for publication in the Navy League of Australia (Vic.Div.) Newsletter, should be addressed to the Editor, Frank McCarthy, email:- ([alistle@bigpond.com](mailto:alistle@bigpond.com)). All other correspondence should be addressed to the Hon. Secretary, Navy League of Australia (Vic.Div.) P.O.Box 2340, Mount Waverley, Victoria 3149: ([raydotgill@optusnet.com.au](mailto:raydotgill@optusnet.com.au)).

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