

## **Coral Sea to the China Seas: The Carrier as a Constant**

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The Battle of the Coral Sea was the first aircraft carrier battle ever fought, comprising a series of naval engagements off the Australian coast during the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> It was fought between May 04 and May 08, 1942, 75 years to date. The start of May 2017 befittingly saw the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea being commemorated in Australia with a dawn service in Townsville, Queensland, by the Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.<sup>2</sup> On May 04, 2017, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, met with the Australian PM aboard the USS *Intrepid*, a WW2-era aircraft carrier from the war in the Pacific, to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>3</sup>

Remarking on the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Prime Minister of Australia said that this was the “first time a naval battle was fought entirely from the air.”<sup>4</sup> And therein lay its uniqueness. With tensions ratcheting up in the China Seas and the ‘attention’ being given to aircraft carriers per se, a look at the Battle of the Coral Sea which just saw its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary being celebrated, would not if anything but be apt.

### **The Battle of the Coral Sea**

The Battle of the Coral Sea was the largest naval battle ever fought so close to Australian shores and was significant for two reasons; firstly, the battle was fought solely by aircraft attacking ships, and secondly, at no time did the opposing fleets sight each other, let alone fire at each other. Additionally, and most importantly, it was the first time that the Japanese southward advance in the Pacific had been stopped.<sup>5</sup>

The situation was precarious for the Allies in the early months of 1942. The Japanese seemed unstoppable post Pearl Harbour and the fall of Singapore. The Australian Navy had lost eight ships. The Dutch East Indies, the north coast of New

Guinea and the naval base of Rabaul were taken. Darwin had been bombed.<sup>6</sup> It was also a time when the Japanese were not quite sated with their progress thus far, and also understood the importance of the aircraft carrier. The Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Navy, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was concerned that the Japanese had missed the aircraft carriers of the US battle fleet at Pearl Harbour. With the US carriers carrying out raids on Japanese bases in the central and south Pacific and the Doolittle raid on Tokyo by bombers from the aircraft carrier USS *Hornet* exacerbating their concerns, the Japanese looked forward to the destruction of the US Pacific Fleet before it could rebuild itself. And so, Yamamoto began planning for a move against the island of Midway.<sup>7</sup>

The Japanese had no plans to invade Australia during the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> They, however, had plans to extend their Pacific control by setting up a base at Tulagi in the southern Solomons and also to capture Port Moresby in New Guinea. This would in effect cut off Australia thus taking them out of the war and leaving them prone to invasion by the Japanese at their convenience, as it were. Control of Port Moresby would safeguard islands held by the Japanese from land based air attacks while enabling the Japanese Air Force to attack Queensland ports and airfields at Horn Island, Cooktown, Coen and Townsville. This would effectively halt the flow of men and materiel by cutting off sea links between Australia and America thus leaving the Japanese unchallengeable in the Pacific area. A subsequent destructive attack on the main US Fleet at Midway would then force the US out of the Pacific war.<sup>9</sup>

The Japanese modus operandi was to first seize Tulagi in the Solomons. Troop carrying transports escorted by the aircraft carrier *Shoho* and other ships would then head for Port Moresby from Rabaul. The invasion force would have additional protection from the aircraft carriers *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* along with cruisers and destroyers. The plan was for these carriers to intercept the US naval force from two sides as it entered the Coral Sea in response to the invasion.<sup>10</sup>

The Allies had however cracked the main Japanese codes and discovered the Japanese plans.<sup>11</sup> Admiral Nimitz sent two carrier task forces led by the USS *Lexington* and the USS *Yorktown* under command of Rear Admiral Fletcher of the US Navy. A third task force commanded by Rear Admiral Crace and led by the cruisers HMAS *Australia*, HMAS *Hobart* and the USS *Chicago*, joined them.<sup>12</sup> On May 07, 1942, US aircraft sank the Japanese auxiliary carrier *Shoho*. However, the next day, Japanese action led to the sinking of the American aircraft carrier USS *Lexington*. Both, the US carrier USS *Yorktown* and the Japanese carrier *Shokaku*

were damaged on the eighth of May 1942 and the Japanese withdrew.<sup>13</sup> Both sides to the battle had a heavy price to pay. The US fleet's losses included one carrier destroyed, one damaged, one oiler and one destroyer each sunk plus a loss of 66 aircraft along with 543 men killed or wounded. The Japanese losses on the other hand had one small carrier destroyed, one destroyer and three small ships sunk along with 77 carrier aircraft lost, and 1074 men killed or wounded.<sup>14</sup>

## **A Turning Point**

The Battle of the Coral Sea will be remembered for not only being the first ever aircraft carrier battle but also as a turning point in the Second World War. It was the first major operational failure for the Japanese in the war and stopped the southward advance of the Japanese Pacific expansion. A month later, the Japanese Navy suffered a major defeat at the Battle of Midway, which saw four Japanese aircraft carriers being sunk within a few hours by the US forces.<sup>15</sup> While the Battle of the Coral Sea saw an end to the Japanese invasion plans for Port Moresby, it also contributed to a weakened Japanese force which met the Allied fleet at Midway. This ended Japanese plans to capture Fiji, Samoa and the New Hebrides.<sup>16</sup>

Carriers and the like notwithstanding, it was also an example of America and Australia coming together against a common enemy. The Battle of the Coral Sea is considered to be a key moment in the alliance between America and Australia. The Australian Prime Minister while commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle said that "The US Navy's commitment of two of its precious carriers into this battle, showed a total commitment to the defence of Australia." He further went on to say that "Today, Australia and the United States continue to work with our allies to address new security threats around the world."<sup>17</sup> This is all the more significant in view of the threat of North Korea and the turmoil in the China Seas.

## **The Carrier as a Constant**

Fast forward from the Coral Sea to the China Seas, and the one strategic constant that springs to the fore is the use of the aircraft carrier as a tool for power projection.<sup>18</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, American naval officer, and an influential exponent of sea power, published 'The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783,' in 1890, a period which saw tremendous technological advances in warships.<sup>19</sup> While there were no aircraft carriers then, if one were to now interpolate them into

that period, then the importance of sea power which he so espoused, would have been even more pronounced.

The China Seas in particular and the Indo-Pacific at large are today, 75 years down the line from the Battle of the Coral Sea, making headlines once again for that same instrument of sea power, the ubiquitous aircraft carrier. April 2017 saw China's first domestically built aircraft carrier taking to the waters. It is China's second aircraft carrier after the *Liaoning*. While the Type 001A carrier which is yet to be named would become operational only by 2020, it is fair to say that there are more carriers to come.<sup>20</sup> China has reasoned the need for aircraft carriers to 'effectively protect its fair rights that are increasingly extending overseas.'<sup>21</sup> However, what is equally as important as the number of carriers is the experience of operating them, and that takes time. The US today being the *numero uno* operator of aircraft carriers with ten carriers,<sup>22</sup> is also the prima donna in the ongoing China Seas - Korean peninsula 'opera' that is currently being played out. The USS *Carl Vinson* is another aircraft carrier that has been in the limelight. The USS *Carl Vinson* Strike Group was ordered to the Korean peninsula in April 2017, by the Trump administration to deter North Korea from carrying out further nuclear tests. The move of the aircraft carrier led to threats from Pyongyang to sink the US aircraft carrier,<sup>23</sup> indicating the seriousness that the DPRK attaches to the presence of such concentrated force, as that which a carrier group brings, into its neighbourhood.

Recent events thus bear testimony to the importance that nations – and especially littoral nations – attach to the aircraft carrier and all that it conveys. The aircraft carrier then remains the most effective tool available to exercise military muscle and so also diplomatic might today. The most potent tool of modern 'gunboat diplomacy' one might say. Aircraft carriers and by extension aircraft carrier groups thus possess the means to be an effective means of deterrence – as seen with the US sending the USS *Carl Vinson* Group to the Korean peninsula to deter North Korea. The aircraft carrier with its reach and firepower also provides reassurance to allies, as indicated in the China Seas with the US Carrier Group carrying out joint naval exercises with its ally, South Korea.<sup>24</sup> Unlike in the Battle of the Coral Sea, today's ship borne aerial elements provide far superior maritime domain awareness. In addition to this, the advent of superior technology and weaponry has increased the potency of aircraft carriers, thus resulting in an increased capacity to affect the outcome of not only maritime engagements but also of those on land too. Further, the nearly unlimited reach of today's nuclear powered aircraft carriers makes it possible for a nation to protect its interests – uninhibited by constraints of distance.

Finally it is indeed ironical that while the navies of the United States and Japan faced each other off in the first ever aircraft carrier battle in May 1942, 75 years to date, the month of May 2017 saw erstwhile US enemy Japan dispatching the helicopter carrier *Izumo* – its biggest warship and a ‘carrier’ nonetheless - to protect a US supply vessel within Japanese waters.<sup>25</sup> Having remained a strategic constant - from the Coral Sea to the China Seas - the aircraft carrier today acts as an extension of national resolve, perhaps more so than ever in the past and is going to continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Lewis, n. 1.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Australia's War 1939–1945, n. 5.

<sup>12</sup> "Remarks at the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea," n. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Australia's War 1939–1945, n. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Lewis, n. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Australia's War 1939–1945, n. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Australia's War 1939–1945, n. 8.

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