

This Day in History... May 4, 1942

Battle of the Coral Sea Begins

On May 4, 1942, the World War II Battle of the Coral Sea began. It became the first naval battle fought mainly by aircraft carriers, with opposing fleets striking each other by air while their ships never came into direct sight.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan advanced rapidly across the Pacific. In a matter of months, Japanese forces captured or threatened Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines. Their next goal was to isolate Australia from the United States and weaken Allied resistance in the South Pacific.

The Philippines had already suffered heavily. American and Filipino forces under Douglas MacArthur retreated to Bataan after Japanese landings. They held out for months but surrendered in April 1942 after severe shortages of food, medicine, and ammunition. The campaign delayed Japanese plans but did not stop them.

Japan then prepared Operation MO, a plan to capture Port Moresby on the southern coast of New Guinea and seize Tulagi in the Solomon Islands. If successful, Japan could threaten sea lanes to Australia and position aircraft closer to the continent.

The Allies had one major advantage: intelligence. American codebreakers had partially broken Japanese naval codes and learned enough to predict the operation. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz sent carrier forces to intercept. The main American carriers were USS *Yorktown* (CV-5) and USS *Lexington* (CV-2) under Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher. They were joined by an Allied surface force including Australian cruisers under Rear Admiral John Crace.

On May 3, Japanese troops occupied Tulagi after a small Australian garrison withdrew. The next day, aircraft from *Yorktown* struck the invasion force. American planes sank the destroyer *Kikuzuki*, several smaller craft, and damaged other vessels. The raid showed the Japanese that Allied carriers were nearby.

Over the next several days, both sides searched a huge ocean area using scout aircraft. This was one of the new realities of carrier warfare: finding the enemy first often mattered more than gun range or armor. Mistaken sightings and incomplete reports created confusion on both sides.

On May 7, Japanese aircraft found and sank the destroyer USS *Sims* (DD-409) and badly damaged the oiler USS *Neosho* (AO-23) after misidentifying them as larger warships. That same day, American planes located the light carrier Japanese carrier *Shoho* protecting the invasion force. They attacked in waves and sank the ship. The famous radio message "Scratch one flattop" was sent after the victory.

The loss of *Shoho* was serious because Japanese transports needed air cover to approach Port Moresby. That night, Japanese commanders postponed the landing.

The decisive carrier clash came on May 8. Both fleets finally located each other in the morning and launched large air strikes almost simultaneously. American aircraft hit the Japanese fleet carrier *Shokaku* with bombs, heavily damaging its flight deck. Its sister ship, *Zuikaku*, avoided direct damage but lost many aircraft and experienced flight crews.

Japanese planes struck back hard. They hit *Lexington* with bombs and torpedoes and damaged *Yorktown*. At first, damage-control teams appeared to save *Lexington*. Later, gasoline vapors ignited and caused massive internal explosions. Fires spread beyond control. The crew was ordered to abandon ship, and most sailors were rescued before the carrier was scuttled by an American destroyer.

Tactically, Japan sank more tonnage because *Lexington* was lost and *Yorktown* damaged. Strategically, however, the Allies gained the more important result. The Port Moresby invasion was canceled. Japan's advance toward Australia had been checked for the first time. *Shokaku* was too damaged for immediate action, and *Zuikaku* lacked enough aircraft. Neither carrier was available a month later for the Battle of Midway, where Japan suffered a major defeat.

The Battle of the Coral Sea changed naval warfare. Battleships never fired at each other. Instead, aircraft launched from moving carriers decided the outcome hundreds of miles away. It was the first clear sign that carriers, not battleships, now ruled the Pacific.



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Chester Nimitz was commander of Allied forces in the Pacific during the battle.



The US Navy played a crucial role in the Pacific Theater of World War II, turning back Japan's advance at key battles like Coral Sea.

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