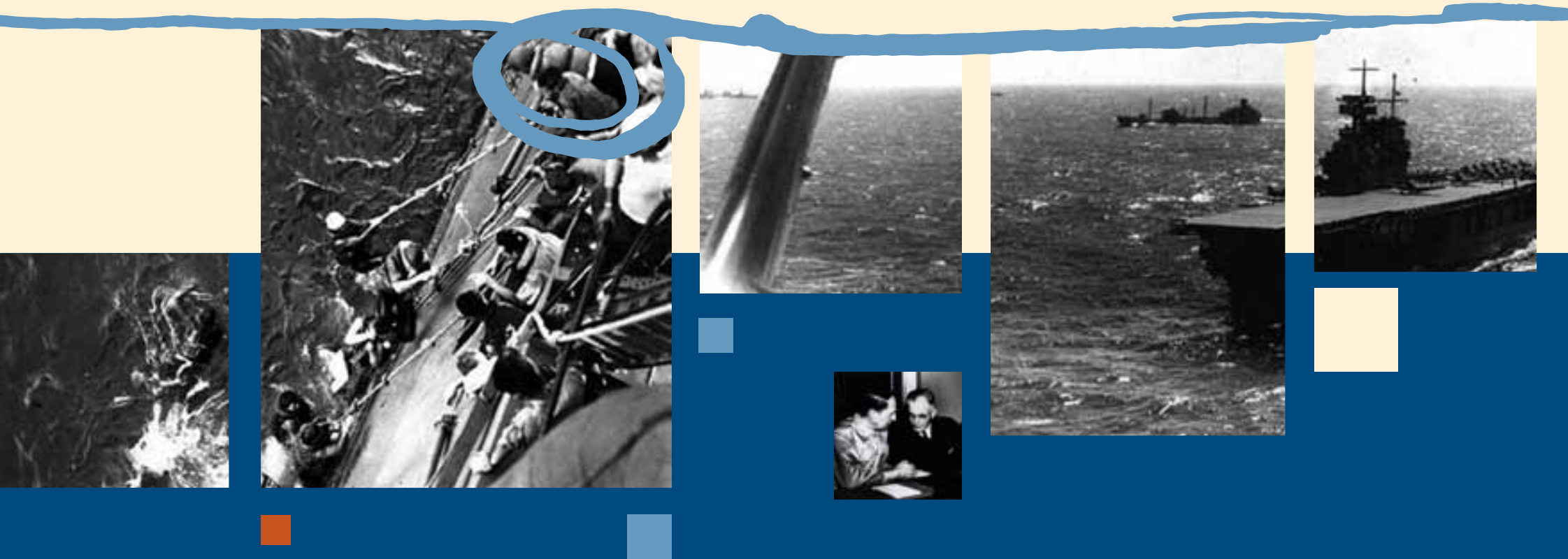




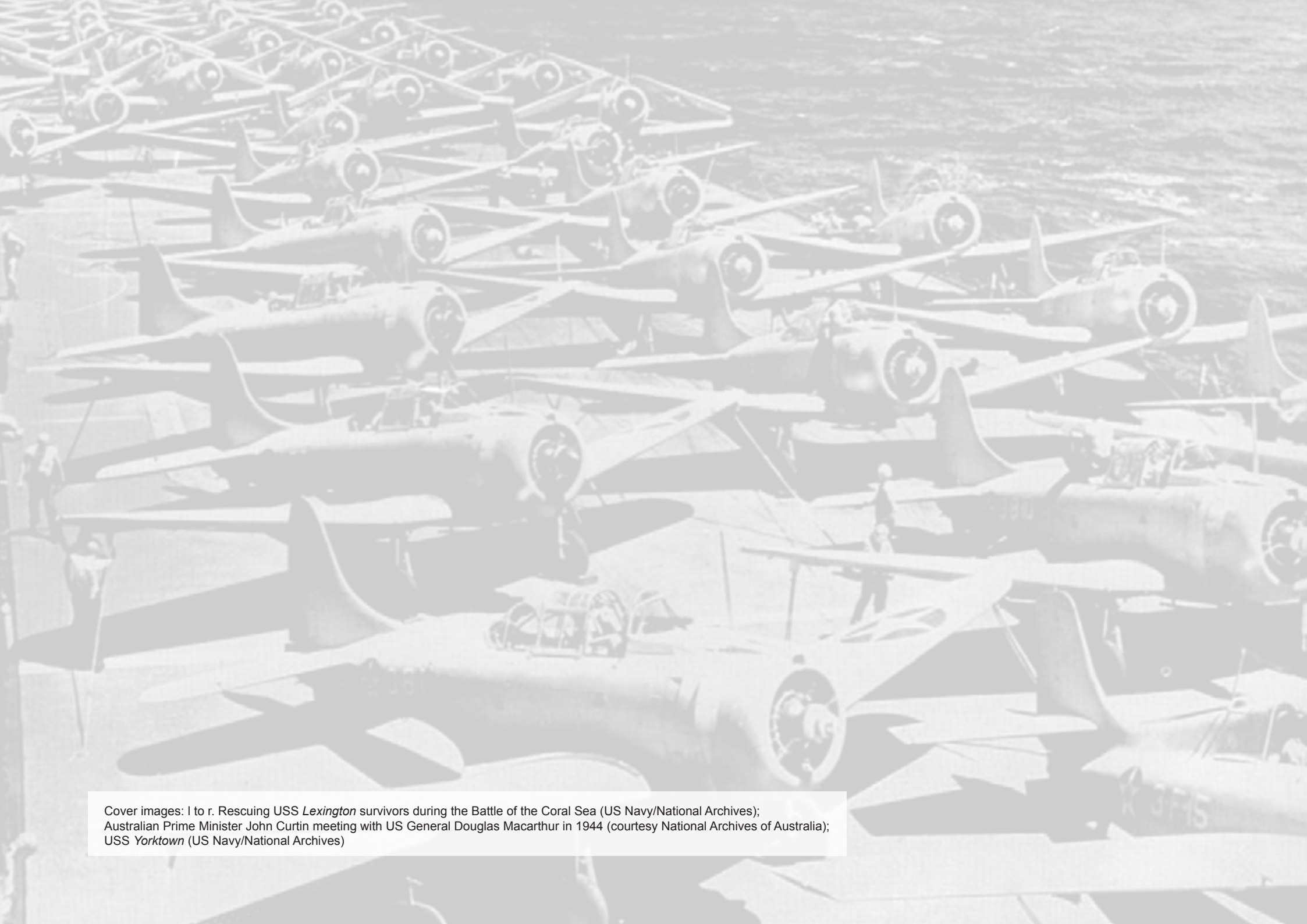
Australian Government

**Department of Sustainability, Environment,
Water, Population and Communities**

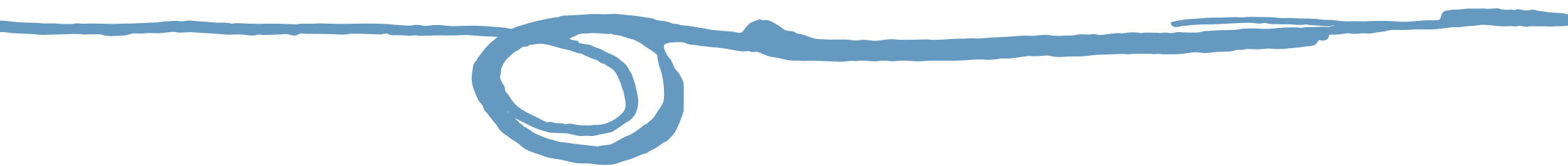


Friends across the Pacific

Shared WWII maritime heritage of Australia and the United States



Cover images: l to r. Rescuing USS *Lexington* survivors during the Battle of the Coral Sea (US Navy/National Archives); Australian Prime Minister John Curtin meeting with US General Douglas MacArthur in 1944 (courtesy National Archives of Australia); USS *Yorktown* (US Navy/National Archives)



Friends across the Pacific

Shared WWII maritime heritage of Australia and the United States



A message from Heritage Minister Tony Burke

The Australian Government is pleased to declare the wrecks of the USS *Lexington*, USS *Sims* and USS *Neosho*, sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea, as protected historic shipwrecks under the *Historic Shipwreck Act 1976*.

The declarations recognise the exceptional heritage significance of the wrecks and will ensure that these remarkable relics of the Battle of the Coral Sea receive the highest protection under Australian law. I am delighted that we have been able to make this announcement as we mark the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea.

The shipwrecks of the Battle of the Coral Sea are a permanent and tangible reminder of one the most dramatic engagements of WWII in the Pacific. They also enable us to explore and reflect on the wartime experiences of Australians and celebrate the ongoing legacy of the battle as the first joint military action between Australian and United States armed forces.

By the end of 1941 thoughts were turning to the need to draw Australian forces back from the war in North Africa and Europe. Many on the Australian home front continued to watch and wait as events unfolded in the Pacific. The fall of Singapore, the bombing of Darwin and the apparent ease with which Japanese forces had taken control of South-East Asia and the northern Pacific led many to believe that Australia would be next.

The battle began on the morning of 4 May, when US aircraft carriers launched their first air strike on the Japanese, starting an encounter that lasted four days and ranged across the breadth of the Coral Sea.

Just before noon on 7 May aircraft from USS *Yorktown* and USS *Lexington* sank the Japanese aircraft carrier *Shoho*. At about the same time, and in a separate engagement, dive bombers from the Japanese carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* sank the destroyer *Sims* and left the US fleet oiler *Neosho* a crippled wreck.

Later that day a combined Australian–American formation, commanded by Admiral Crace and including the cruisers HMAS *Hobart* and HMAS *Australia*, was attacked by another force of Japanese bombers. The actions taken culminated in what came to be called Crace's Chase, when this formation was positioned to attack a Japanese invasion force as it moved into the Coral Sea. The appearance and strength of this force greatly influenced the decision by Japanese commanders to turn back and abandon plans for a seaborne invasion of Port Moresby – an event which would certainly have changed the course of the war in the south-west Pacific.





The battle continued on 8 May, when the two main carrier forces engaged directly for the first time, resulting in the loss of the *Lexington* with 216 members of her crew and major damage to the two Japanese carriers.

The Coral Sea Battle was the first major setback for Japanese forces in the Pacific. But it came with a heavy Allied toll: the loss of more than 500 lives, 66 US aircraft, and the three warships we are protecting under this historic shipwreck declaration.

The remains of these three United States warships are a tangible and poignant reminder of the service and sacrifice of the Australian and United States servicemen who fought in the battle.

The Battle of the Coral Sea is seen as the genesis of an alliance between our two countries that has grown over the last 70 years into a firm friendship.

Only months before the battle, Australia's wartime Prime Minister, John Curtin, foreshadowed this friendship – and a profound shift in Australia's relationships with the world – in his New Year's Eve address in 1941: "Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom."

I welcome the collaboration between our governments, through the United States Embassy in Canberra and the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), to achieve this historic shipwreck declaration, which I hope in some way expresses the gratitude and thanks of all Australians for the actions and bravery of a remarkable generation.

Tony Burke



A message from Jeff Bleich, United States Ambassador to Australia

On behalf of the President and the people of the United States of America, I am extremely grateful to Australia's government and the people of Australia for designating the USS *Lexington*, USS *Sims*, and USS *Neosho* as protected sites under the Historic Shipwreck Act of 1976. The crews of these great ships fought bravely and gave their lives to keep Australia free. This designation, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea, is a fitting tribute to their exceptional sacrifice. It will allow future generations of Americans and Australians alike to know not only of these storied ships, but of their enduring legacy. Their service in the battles that saved Australia remind us of the unbreakable bonds between our nations, and of the price both of our nations have paid to ensure the enduring peace and stability of this region.

We are grateful for the collaboration of partners across the Pacific to identify the final resting places of these ships. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Australian Department of Sustainability, the Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPAC) have worked tirelessly together to take this vast ocean and demonstrate that it does not divide us—it binds us together. We thank the Hon Tony Burke MP, Minister for SEWPAC, without whose leadership this designation would not have happened. And most of all, we thank the people of Australia for their enduring friendship and commitment. By preserving these historic ships, you reinforce the deep bonds between our nations, and stir the gratitude of our people.

Jeff Bleich





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WAR IN THE PACIFIC (1941–1945)

The war in the Pacific forever changed Australia and Australians' sense of their place and partnerships in the world. It was instrumental in forging the strong bond between the United States and Australia.



On the morning of 8 December 1941, barely two months after taking office, Australia's wartime Prime Minister John Curtin was woken by his press secretary to the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. For the first time Australia independently declared war on a foreign power.

John Curtin delivered his famous New Year's message to the Australian public in the form of an article published in the *Melbourne Herald* of 27 December 1941:

Without any inhibitions of any kind I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free from any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.

We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces. We know the constant threat of invasion. We know the dangers of dispersal of strength, but we know, too, that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on.

We are, therefore, determined that Australia shall not go and we shall devote all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give to our country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against our enemy.





*John Curtin at work on a Sunday morning in the study at The Lodge, 1942.
Image courtesy John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. Records of the Curtin Family. Image no. JCPML00376/6*

The fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, followed four days later by the bombing of Darwin, further increased fear in Australia at the apparent ease with which Japanese forces were marching through the Pacific.

Many felt it was inevitable that Australia would be next. The bombing of Darwin on 19 February was both the first and

the largest single attack mounted by a foreign power against Australia. On that day, 242 Japanese aircraft attacked. It was the first and the largest of almost 100 air raids against Australia during 1942 and 1943.

The Battle of the Coral Sea, from 4 to 8 May 1942, was the first time that Australian and United States forces joined together to fight the war in the Pacific. There is no doubting that Australians looked to the battle as possibly one of their last chances to protect and defend their country, and saw Australia's survival as intrinsically linked with an Allied victory in the Coral Sea.

John Curtin's address to the Australian Parliament on 8 May 1942 emphasised the fundamental importance of the outcome of the Battle of the Coral Sea to Australia's future.

... at this moment nobody can tell what the result of the engagement may be. If it should go advantageously, we shall have cause for great gratitude and our position will then be a little clearer. But if we should not have the advantages from this battle for which we hope, all that confronts us is a sterner ordeal, a greater and graver responsibility ... This is to-day the front line ... Men are fighting for Australia to-day...

Victory in the Battle of the Coral Sea not only proved to be a turning point in the war but provided an immeasurable morale boost at a time of great peril for all Australians. By preventing the Japanese from achieving their objective—the occupation of Port Moresby—the Battle of the Coral Sea also proved to be a long-term tactical victory through the reduction in the size and number of enemy forces available to future operations.



Darwin 1942. Image courtesy Sea Power Centre – Australia



THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

The Battle of the Coral Sea was one of the most significant engagements of the war in the Pacific.

The shipwrecks of the United States warships, the USS *Lexington*, USS *Sims* and USS *Neosho*, sunk during the battle, are a poignant and permanent reminder of the service and sacrifice of those who served during the battle and of those for whom the wrecks are a final resting place.

Besides reminding us of the bravery and dedication of the United States servicemen, the shipwrecks of the Battle of the Coral Sea give us an opportunity to explore the wartime experience of Australian service personnel.

Japanese control of South-East Asia and the northern Pacific was virtually unchallenged. Australian troops had been fighting the war in Europe and North Africa since 1939, while on the home front Australians kept an ever watchful and wary eye on events in the Pacific.

Since entering the war in December 1941 Japanese forces had secured for themselves a defensive perimeter that stretched throughout the Asia–Pacific region, from the Kuriles southward

through the Marshall Islands to New Britain, and then westward to Java, Sumatra, and Burma. The Japanese had also established outposts in Lae and Salamaua in northern New Guinea.

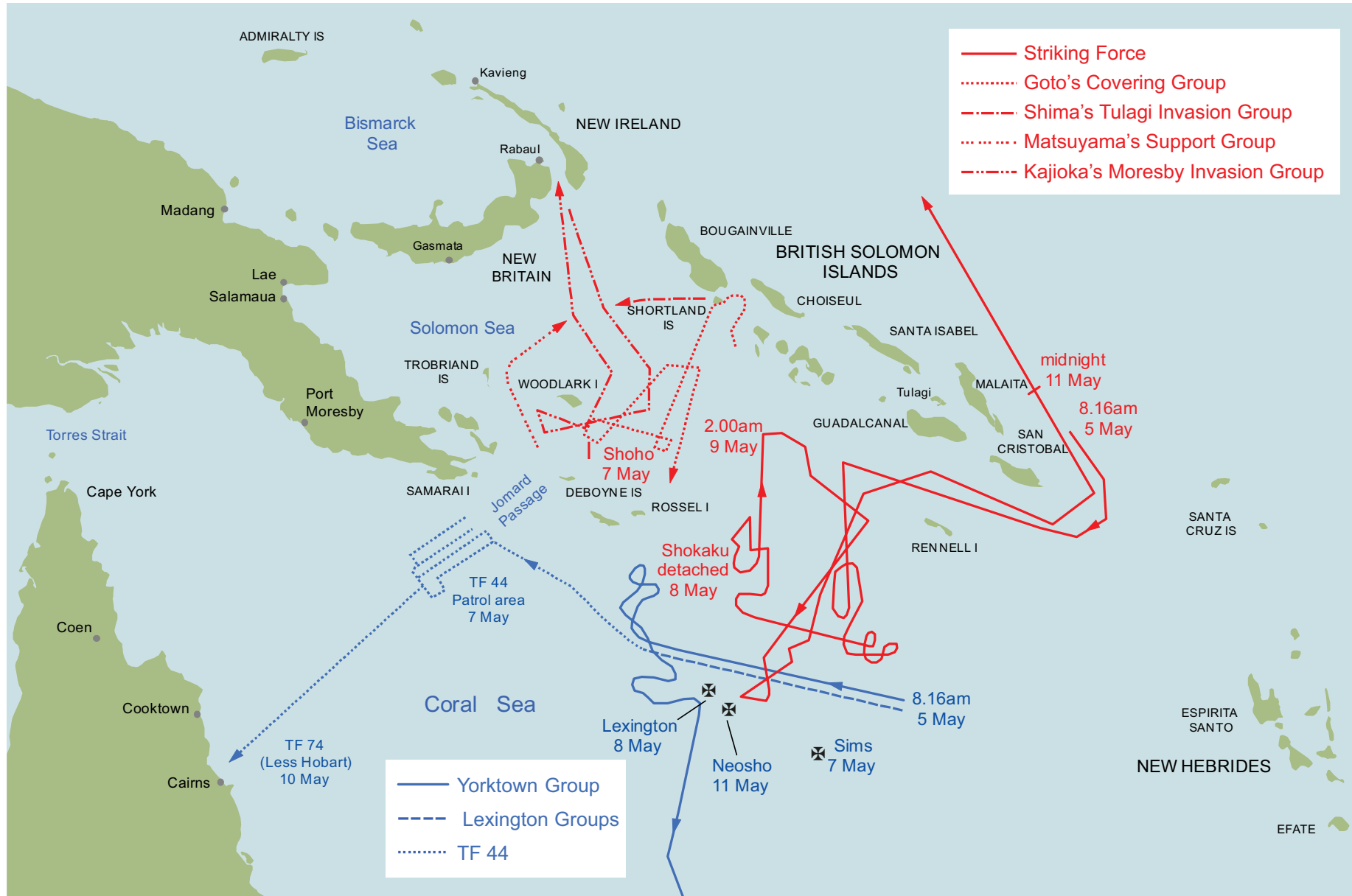
In the dark days that followed the bombing of Darwin, it was easy to believe that Australia would be next.

By April 1942 the Japanese Army was keen to extend its sphere of control and strengthen its defensive positions throughout the region. Intelligence gathered by the joint American–Australian Fleet Radio Unit, based in Melbourne, indicated that an operation to capture Port Moresby by sea was imminent. With the Japanese operation, codenamed “MO”, expected to start in early May, United States and Australian commanders began to position their naval resources in the Coral Sea for a counter attack.



*HMAS Australia under attack.
Image courtesy Sea Power Centre – Australia*

Map of the Battle of the Coral Sea and Crace's Chase



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Operation MO was based on the strength and power of the Japanese large aircraft carriers, the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*. Allied commanders countered this with a force of their own carriers, the USS *Yorktown* and USS *Lexington*. The battle started on 4 May 1942.

Four days of fierce fighting followed. As well as the battle, crews dealt with bad weather, confusion and communication breakdowns. At the end of the last day of the battle on 8 May it was clear that the Allied forces had prevented the Japanese from succeeding in their strategic objective—the capture by sea of Port Moresby. If it weren't for the Allied victory in the Coral Sea, Japanese plans to cut Australia off from the west coast of the United States and to capture Port Moresby would have succeeded—and probably have prolonged the war.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was significant for several reasons: it was the first defeat of Japanese forces in the war; it proved the importance of aircraft carriers to tactical and strategic outcomes for modern warfare; and it was the first joint military action between United States and Australian forces.



USS Lexington off the coast of San Diego, California, October 1941.
US Navy photograph, National Archives



USS Yorktown.
US Navy photograph, National Archives

THREE HISTORIC SHIPWRECKS FROM THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

The warships from the Battle of the Coral Sea protected under the Historic Shipwrecks Act provide a tangible link to events crucial to the United States and Australian military histories.



USS Lexington under fire. US Navy photograph, National Archives

USS *Lexington*

The USS *Lexington* was a famous United States warship. In the early morning of 8 May, in concert with the USS *Yorktown*, the *Lexington* launched an attack on Japanese forces. At 11.18 am, only minutes after the end of *Lexington*'s initial attack, the Japanese attack began. In just 19 minutes the *Lexington* received two direct torpedo hits, one forward and one opposite the bridge, as well as a number of near misses that caused damage. The attack cost the Japanese 20 aircraft.

At first the damage to the *Lexington* was not thought to be serious. The crew had taken steps to correct listing caused by the torpedos, and it was expected that the fires on board could be brought under control. However later in the day a spark ignited petrol vapours and caused a heavy internal explosion. The fires grew out of control and orders were soon given to abandon ship. After all the survivors had been rescued, the



Lexington was torpedoed by the destroyer USS *Phelps* and sunk. In all, 216 members of the *Lexington*'s crew lost their lives during the combat.

**The wreck of the USS *Lexington* lies at,
150 12.1' 00" S latitude, 1550 27' 00" E.**

USS *Sims* and USS *Neosho*

The USS *Neosho* was an oil tanker that provided the larger ships of the US taskforce with essential fuel during the battle. On 6 May, the *Neosho* refuelled the carrier *Yorktown* and heavy cruiser *Astoria*, and then retired from the carrier force with its lone escort, the destroyer USS *Sims*. The following day, 7 May, at 10 am, Japanese aircraft spotted the two ships and, believing them to be a carrier and her escort, launched the first of two attacks.

The USS *Sims* was attacked from all directions, the attack was overwhelming. The USS *Sims* suffered three hits from 500-pound bombs. Two exploded in the engine room, and within minutes the ship buckled and began to sink. As the *Sims* slid beneath the waves, there was a tremendous explosion that pushed what was left of the ship almost 15 feet out of the water. Fifteen of the USS *Sims* crew survived and were rescued by the *Neosho*, but 237 perished.

**The wreck of the USS *Sims* lies at,
160 02' 00" S latitude, 1570 57' 00" E.**

The *Neosho* sustained seven direct hits, including a suicide dive by one of the Japanese bombers. It was soon a blazing wreck and in danger of breaking in two. In spite of this, the crew managed to shoot down at least three Japanese attackers. It was only the remarkable seamanship of the crew and their excellent damage control skills that kept the *Neosho* afloat for the next four days.



USS Neosho. US Navy photograph, National Archives



USS Sims. US Navy photograph, National Archives

On 11 May rescue came for the exhausted crew. The 123 survivors—including the survivors of USS *Sims*—were rescued by the destroyer USS *Henley*. Survivors watched as the *Neosho*, whose crew had worked so valiantly to keep her afloat, was sunk. One hundred and eighty-two of the *Neosho*'s crew had perished.

**The wreck of the USS *Neosho* lies at,
150 35' 00" S latitude, 1550 36' 00" E.**

The three shipwrecks from the Battle of the Coral Sea are now protected historic shipwrecks under the Australian Government's Historic Shipwrecks Act. Any activities that may interfere with, destroy or cause disturbance to the wrecks, or remove their associated relics, are now illegal under Australian law.

Leslie B Knox: An Australian fighting for the United States in the thick of the Battle of the Coral Sea



Leslie B Knox was born in 1916 in Brisbane, to Scottish immigrants. Why and when the family moved to the United States of America is not clear, but Knox graduated from Albright College in 1938.

Ensign Knox gained his wings on 10 May 1940 and flew scouting missions before being assigned to USS *Yorktown* to fly the latest single seat F4F Wildcat aircraft.

On the night of 7 May 1942, a formation of Japanese Type 97 "Kate" torpedo bombers emerged from a cloud and flew beneath the Wildcats, going in the opposite direction. Flying at the rear, Knox had the best opportunity to attack, and broke formation to chase the six Kates. Knox destroyed a bomber with his first machine-gun burst. The attack dispersed the formation.

Leslie Knox did not return to the *Yorktown*. No trace of his aircraft was found. Posthumously, the United States Navy promoted Knox to Lieutenant for his actions on 7 May 1942 and awarded him the Navy Cross, the second-highest gallantry award for American navy personnel after the Medal of Honor.

In 1943, the United States Navy named a Destroyer Escort ship, DE-580, in honour of Leslie Knox. The ship was christened by Lt Knox's widow, Mrs Louise Kennedy Knox. The USS *Leslie LB Knox* went on to serve with distinction in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.



Ensign Leslie L B Knox (posthumously promoted to Lieutenant). Image courtesy Albright College
USS *Leslie L B Knox*. US Navy photograph, National Archives

AUSTRALIAN ACTIONS: CRACE'S CHASE AND TASK GROUP 17.3

The Australian naval contingent sailed from Sydney on 1 May 1942 as Taskforce 44, under the command of Rear Admiral Jack Crace of the Royal Navy with orders to join with the United States aircraft carriers on 4 May in the Coral Sea. It consisted of the heavy cruiser HMAS *Australia* and the light cruiser HMAS *Hobart*.



Rear Admiral Jack Crace

On 6 May the entire Allied force was amalgamated as Taskforce 17. Rear Admiral Crace, with the cruisers *Australia*, *Hobart* and the USS *Chicago* and destroyers USS *Perkins* and USS *Walke*, commanded the Support Group, which was now designated Task Group 17.3.

On the morning of 7 May, Task Group 17.3 was reinforced with the destroyer USS *Farragut* and instructed to block any Japanese forces intending to pass through the Jomard Passage into the Coral Sea. Crace proceeded at high speed and, having arrived off the Jomard Passage by that afternoon, ordered his ships to take up an anti-aircraft formation. The actions by Crace became known as Crace's Chase.



Image courtesy Sea Power Centre – Australia



*HMAS Hobart.
Image courtesy Sea Power Centre – Australia*

Japanese reconnaissance aircraft soon sighted the Support Group and a dozen Japanese land-based torpedo bombers began their attack. Crace altered course so that his ships were heading directly towards the oncoming aircraft and each ship then began evasive manoeuvres. Heavy and accurate fire downed at least one enemy bomber and encouraged the others to release their torpedoes early. Some casualties in the Allied ships were caused by strafing, but no torpedoes struck home and the Japanese lost at least five aircraft.

Immediately following this first wave another 19 Japanese aircraft subjected the *Australia* to an accurate low level-bombing attack which was only avoided by skilful ship handling. A few minutes later, three USAAF high-level bombers from Australia, failing to recognise that the ships below were friendly, began their own attack, fortunately with no result.

On their return to Rabaul, the over-optimistic Japanese airmen reported that they had sunk an Allied battleship, and damaged both a second battleship and a cruiser. As a result Rabaul launched no further strikes against Crace.

Although Task Group 17.3 had not gone into direct action against the Japanese Port Moresby Landing Force, its presence and activity was influential in convincing the Japanese Command decision to turn back the landing force, thus preventing a sea borne invasion of Port Moresby.



USS Perkins. US Navy photograph



USS Walke. US Navy photograph



USS Farragut. US Navy photograph

AN ONGOING LEGACY

The price of victory in the Coral Sea was high, with 543 men killed or wounded. Allied forces suffered the loss of the USS *Lexington*, USS *Sims* and USS *Neosho*, along with 66 US aircraft.

The legacy of those men, lives on in the strength and vitality of the US–Australia alliance. The Battle of the Coral Sea is recognised both in Australia and America as a defining moment in the true beginning of our alliance—one that was formalised by the signing of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951.

For the last 70 years the alliance has grown and developed into a firm friendship and is a reflection and a testament to the service and sacrifice of those who fought and died during the battle. The bonds of friendship formed between the two countries on the Coral Sea continue today.



United States Navy flight deck crew. US Navy/National Archives



PROTECTING OUR SHARED MARITIME HERITAGE

The protection of the USS *Lexington*, USS *Neosho* and USS *Sims* is the result of cooperation between the governments of Australia and the United States. The shipwreck positions were identified as a result of archival research led by the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities and its equivalent agency in the United States, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Australia has a long, rich and diverse maritime history. From the earliest known shipwreck, the *Trial* in 1622, to the discoveries of the HMAS *Sydney II* (1942) and the HSK *Kormoran* (1942) in 2008, thousands of ships have sunk in Australian waters and their location uncovered.

To ensure that shipwrecks—underwater for at least 75 years or especially declared—are protected, the Australian Government introduced the Historic Shipwrecks Act in 1976. This legislation protects the physical remains of shipwrecks and their associated relics.

The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities is responsible for the administration of the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* and works cooperatively with Australia's state and territory governments to ensure our shipwreck heritage is protected and conserved now, and for future generations.

As well as the Historic Shipwrecks Act, in 1992 the Australian Government established the Historic Shipwrecks Program. The program was introduced to increase the knowledge, use, appreciation and enjoyment of Australia's historic shipwrecks by funding projects that conserve, protect and preserve wrecks and their associated relics.

Projects funded under the Historic Shipwrecks Program include the excavations of the First Fleet's flagship HMS *Sirius* (1790) at Norfolk Island and the *Batavia* (1629) in Western Australia. It also includes documenting sites such as SS *Florence D* (1942) in the Northern Territory, MV *City of Rayville* (1940) in Victoria and AHS *Centaur* (1943) in Queensland. Other significant projects include the protection of the Japanese Midget Submarine *M24* (1942) in New South Wales. Many of these






sites have shared heritage values with other countries and often include military or civilian human remains, which are protected from interference.

The Historic Shipwrecks Program is focused on the protection and conservation of shipwrecks, but not at the exclusion of people experiencing Australia's maritime heritage. Indeed, the program has long focused on encouraging responsible recreational diving as well as encouraging community participation in locating, documenting, monitoring and protecting shipwrecks. The Historic Shipwrecks Program ensures that Australia's historic shipwreck heritage continues to be accessible and valued, now and into the future, not only for the people of Australia but for those people throughout the world who share our heritage.

For more information about Australia's maritime heritage please visit www.environment.gov.au/heritage/shipwrecks



Marie Gabrielle (1869), Wreck Bay, Victoria. © DSEWPaC



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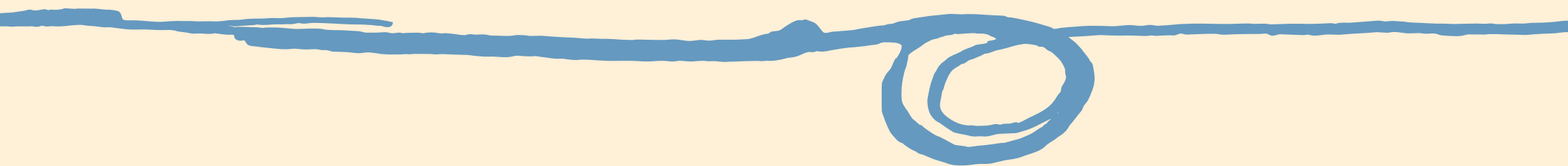
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www.environment.gov.au/heritage/shipwrecks