

CORAL SEA COMMEMORATION SERVICE

His Excellency Rear Admiral Kevin Scarce AC CSC RANR

Governor of South Australia

Sunday 2nd May, 2010

- **The Honourable Bernard Finnigan MLC, representing the Premier**
- **Mr Steve Georganas, Federal Member for Hindmarsh, representing the Prime Minister**
- **Mr Dan Callahan, Consular officer in Melbourne and**
- **Lieutenant Daniel Ford of the US Navy, representing the Government of the United States of America**
- **Ms Isobel Redmond, Leader of the Opposition**
- **Mr Michael Harbison, The Right Honourable The Lord Mayor of Adelaide**
- **Defence Force representatives from South Australia**
- **Chief Superintendent Fred Trueman, representing the Commissioner of Police**
- **Mr Nic Rogers, representing the Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Veterans' Affairs in South Australia**
- **Mrs Dana Stoba, President of the Australian American Association in South Australia**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen:**

Australia and the United States have a shared history which goes back to before the World Wars. Both have previously been British colonies and many Americans flocked to the Australian goldfields in the 1880s.

The relationship really came to prominence in World War 2, when the two nations worked extremely closely in the Pacific war against Japan, with General Douglas MacArthur undertaking his role as Supreme Allied Commander based in Australia, effectively having Australian troops and resources under his command.

During this period, the cultural interaction between Australia and the US was elevated to a higher level as over one million US military personnel moved through Australia during the course of the war.

One of the more important events in the development of our early relationship was the Battle of the Coral Sea.

The build up to the Battle of the Coral Sea started with the bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 7th 1941. As Japan extended its defensive perimeter, Singapore fell and Darwin was bombed in February 1942.

The overall Japanese strategy was to extend Japan's eastern defensive perimeter to the central Pacific and in so doing cut communications between the US and Australia. With Australia isolated, Japan would force them to withdraw from fighting. A vital element of this strategy was the capture and subsequent building of a base in Port Moresby.

I think we have all heard the history of the battle many times, so I don't intend to re-count it again today. I will, however, make some observations about the impact of that battle on the war in the Pacific.

At the conclusion of the Battle, both sides publicly claimed victory.

In terms of ships lost, the Japanese won a tactical victory by sinking an American fleet carrier, an oiler, and a destroyer which, at that time, represented one quarter of the US carrier strength in the Pacific.

The battle was seen by the Japanese as merely a temporary setback. The results confirmed their low opinion of American fighting capability, and supported their belief that future carrier operations against the US were assured of success. Had they not been so overconfident, they might have wondered a little more about how the American carriers managed to turn up in the right place at the right time to confront the invading fleet.

The Australians and the US forces in Australia were initially disappointed with the outcome, fearing the operation was the precursor to an invasion of the Australian mainland and that the setback to Japan was only temporary.

In strategic terms the consequences for Japan were much more serious. The Allies prevented the seaborne invasion of Port Moresby, lessening the threat of interference with the supply lines between the US and Australia. And since the Japanese were unable to support another attempt to invade Port Moresby from sea, they were forced to expend additional resources on an ambitious attempt to take Port Moresby by land.

The battle also marked the first time that Japanese invasion force had been turned back without achieving its objective. This gradually lifted the morale of the Allies after a series of serious defeats.

Perhaps the most significant effect of the Coral Sea battle was the impact it had upon the Battle of Midway. You will recall that the overall Japanese Naval strategy was to launch a devastating attack on the main American fleet at Midway, between Pearl Harbour and Japan, destroying it and forcing America out of the Pacific War.

The loss of two Japanese carriers that Admiral Yamamoto had planned to use, plus their belief that Yorktown had been sunk, provided the US with a decisive advantage.

At Midway the entire Japanese Pacific fleet of carriers was virtually destroyed. This opened the way for the Allies to regain all the areas that had fallen to the Japanese in the Pacific, though only after several more years, and enormous losses.

The Battle of Midway proved to be the turning point in the war in the Pacific. Japan never recovered from the loss of four carriers in that Battle.

The Battle of the Coral Sea provided the first hints that the Japanese high-water-mark had been reached. The Battle of Midway put that sign up for all to see.

Conclusion

The Battle of the Coral Sea thwarted the Japanese planned invasion of Port Moresby and ended the Japanese expansion southward. The Official History of the Royal Australian Navy refers to the Battle of the Coral Sea as "Japan's first check".

The Battle forged a strong and lasting alliance with the United States, based on the realization that our two great nations were destined to share common interests, common attitudes and common goals.

Today we gather to remember those brave Australian and American sailors and airmen who fought so valiantly in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

We honour their sacrifice and dedication to the cause of peace.