

1942: The battle for Australia

In 1942 Australia faced a critical stage of World War II. Darwin, Broome and Townsville were bombed by the Japanese. Early May saw the beginning of a naval battle that changed the course of history and forged a bond between Australia and the United States of America. This was the Battle of the Coral Sea. It took place in the air and sea, not far from Cairns.



HMAS Deloraine during the Japanese attacks on Darwin. Picture: AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

The enemy advances

From 1931, government policy in Japan was dictated by the armed forces. "The spirit of militarism with its extreme passion, brutality and frenzy of determination infected the Japanese empire like a plague," wrote Jerome T. Hagen in *War in the Pacific, Volume 1. Japan's ultimate aim was to conquer China and the whole of South-east Asia.*

Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku of the Imperial Japanese Navy had travelled extensively in the US before the war while he was the naval attaché in Washington, D.C. and a student of English language at Harvard. His knowledge of American industrial capacity convinced him that Japan did not have enough strength for a military race with the US.

Yamamoto's wartime aim was to knock out the US Pacific Fleet at its base on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, so the US could not oppose Japan's conquest of South East Asia, China and the Pacific islands. It was intended that these campaigns would take place in the 18 months following the crippling attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941.

The Japanese were ultimately planning to draw what they thought would be a weakened, rebuilt US fleet into a final and fatal battle so there would be no opposition to their push to conquer China. Fortunately, for Australia, things did not quite go as planned.

Things to explore

- The nations involved in World War II formed two opposing forces. Investigate who formed the Allies and the Axis.
- Look up a map of the Japanese advance south in the Pacific using an image search on the internet search engine of your choice. Key words for the search are "War in the Pacific – Japanese advance south"

Key dates in the battles for Australia

- **December 7, 1941 (December 8 in Australia):** Attack on Pearl Harbour. 21 vessels sunk or severely damaged; 323 US Army and Navy planes damaged or destroyed; 2390 Americans killed. The attack did not weaken the US Navy as expected. The aircraft carriers Lexington, Enterprise and Saratoga were not in port at the time of the attack.
- **December 8, 1941:** Singapore bombed (Singapore fell on February 15, 1942)
- **February 19, 1942:** Darwin bombed, to facilitate the establishment of bases on various Pacific island groups (Fiji, New Hebrides, Solomon Islands, Samoa) from where the Japanese planned to blockade Australia.

- **March 3, 1942:** Broome bombed
- **May 4-8, 1942:** Battle of the Coral Sea
- **May-June 1942:** Submarine attacks on Sydney and Newcastle
- **July 1942:** North Queensland air raids (Townsville and Mossman)
- **July-December 1942:** Kokoda campaign

Things to explore

- Compile the above dates and information into a time line.

Coral Sea battle

The Battle of the Coral Sea was the largest naval battle fought so close to Australia. It was fought entirely by aircraft attacking ships; the opposing ships did not fire at each other at any time during the battle. More importantly, it was the first time the Japanese had been halted during their southward advance in the Pacific.



One month later, the Japanese suffered a major defeat at the Battle of Midway, losing four aircraft carriers in a few hours. The Japanese abandoned their plans for the capture of places like Fiji, Samoa and the New Hebrides. They no longer possessed the ability to cut off Australia from American support and the two battles reinforced the alliance between Australia and America.

- May 1: Japanese invasion fleet leaves Rabaul to take Port Moresby, on the south coast of Papua; a Japanese carrier force is sent to patrol into the Coral Sea to intercept any American aircraft carriers sent to thwart the attack on Port Moresby.
- May 2: The Japanese land at Tulagi in the Solomon Islands.
- Invasion fleet heads towards Port Moresby with carrier air support.
- The Allies have intercepted and deciphered Japanese radio messages – using intelligence gained from cracking the Japanese codes.
- An American carrier force, supported by Australian cruisers and destroyers, awaits the invaders.

- The Americans, with ships from two carrier forces, including the carriers Yorktown and Lexington are commanded by Rear Admiral Fletcher of the US Navy.
- HMAS Hobart and HMAS Australia are commanded by Australian-born Rear Admiral John Crace of the Royal Navy.
- May 7: American aircraft sink the Japanese auxiliary carrier Shoho.
- May 8: the Japanese locate and attack USS Lexington which catches fire and sinks a few hours later. USS Yorktown and the Japanese carrier Shokaku are both damaged, and the Japanese withdraw.

Things to explore:

- For general research on the Battle of the Coral Sea, look up Operation CLICK online. This is a classroom resource that uses the following websites: www.wv2australia.gov.au and www.anzacsite.gov.au. Worksheets can be downloaded
- Research the American, Australian and Japanese ships that took part in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Life at home

It was wartime, but life went on. People did the shopping, wrote to loved ones serving in the armed forces and got married. Wartime meant people had to be frugal and do everything they could for the war effort by not being wasteful. The government issued ration books containing coupons that could be redeemed for restricted foodstuffs such as butter, eggs, meat, bacon, bread and milk. Any family owning a cow was indeed fortunate. The currency of the day was pounds, shillings and pence.

Traditional long white bridal gowns had to be foregone for something more spartan. But brides could still look elegant and lovely,



Corinne Maclean on her wedding day

as did Corinne Maclean, aged 19, in a classic two-piece outfit with gloves and pearls, at her parents' Sandy Bay home, just before her marriage to Louis Shoobridge on March 4, 1942. The wedding breakfast was held at Wrest Point Riviera Hotel. Formerly the home of the Drysdale family, this was a favourite destination for US troops on R&R (rest and recreation.) The Americans had access to luxuries including silk stockings, which was very much a positive in the eyes of Australian girls, although Australian men weren't so pleased.

Things to explore:

- Research wartime fashions and hairstyles of men, women and children.
- Find out when Australia changed to the decimal system of currency and metric measurement. Design a Powerpoint presentation to illustrate the old and new systems: consider coins and banknotes, length, area, velocity, weight, volume, temperature and barometric pressure.
- Research well-known brands of foodstuffs such as Gravox, Cadbury's chocolate and cocoa, Coca-Cola, Heinz soup, CSR sugar, and Bushells tea and coffee. Put together a collection of print advertisements for these products through the decades. Try searching at www.trove.nla.gov.au

Peace

St Monica's Cathedral in Cairns is home to what is believed to be Australia's largest modern commission of stained glass. Three panels dubbed the "peace window" surround the front door and were created by Gerry Cummins and Jill Stehn in 1995 to commemorate 50 years of peace in the Pacific region since the end of World War II. The cathedral is dedicated to the Battle of the Coral Sea, fought due east of Cairns. The windows abound in symbolism, with images of tangled wrecks, weapons and other military equipment, rusting and decaying at the bottom of the sea, now peacefully housing thriving colonies of coral and other marine life.



Window designed and made by Gerry Cummins and Jill Stehn

Things to explore:

- Research the Peace Windows of St Monica's Cathedral, Cairns.

Information sourced from:

www.wv2australia.gov.au,
www.anzacsite.gov.au and
www.cumminstehnstainedglass.com.au