

World War II  
75th Anniversary Commemorative Series

---

COMBAT NARRATIVES

# The Battle of the Coral Sea

*Consisting of the actions at Tulagi,  
May 4th; off Misima, May 7th; and  
in the Coral Sea on May 8th, 1942*



Naval History and Heritage Command

U.S. Navy



Official U.S. Navy Reprint Published 2017 by

Naval History and Heritage Command  
805 Kidder Breese Street SE  
Washington Navy Yard, DC 20374-5060

[www.history.navy.mil](http://www.history.navy.mil)

**ISBN 978-1-943604-06-7**

This is the Official U.S. Government edition of this publication and is herein identified to certify its authenticity. Use of 978-1-943604-06-7 is for U.S. Navy Editions only. The Secretary of the Navy requests that any reprinted edition clearly be labeled as a copy of the authentic work with a new ISBN.

Cover: "Death of the *Shoho*," an oil painting by Robert Benney, 1942. (Naval History and Heritage Command Art Collection)

## Foreword to 75th Anniversary Edition

The Battle of the Coral Sea was the first carrier-versus-carrier battle in history; opposing surface forces never sighted each other.

U.S. naval intelligence provided Admiral Chester W. Nimitz with sufficient warning and understanding of Japanese intent and capability that he chose to commit the two carriers *Lexington* (CV-2) and *Yorktown* (CV-5) against a Japanese force expected to consist of two fleet carriers, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, and the light carrier *Shoho*. Nimitz committed *Enterprise* (CV-6) and *Hornet* (CV-8) as well, but they were unable to reach the area in time, due the timing of the Doolittle Raid against Japan.

The battle was a tactical draw—although some accounts argue a tactical U.S. loss—but a strategic victory for the United States. The Japanese force failed in its objective to capture Port Moresby, New Guinea, which would have threatened the northeast coast of Australia. Although the Japanese had previously suffered set-backs, this was the first time that proved permanent. In addition, the Japanese carrier *Shokaku* was severely damaged, and attrition to the air groups of both *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* caused both carriers to miss the decisive battle of Midway a month later, which almost certainly changed the course of that battle, and of the war.

The Japanese also lost the small carrier *Shoho* on 7 May to a gross over-kill of U.S. carrier torpedo and dive bombers, and was the first carrier lost by either side in the war. The cost to American forces was high; *Lexington* was sunk as a result of secondary explosions following torpedo and bomb hits, the *Yorktown* was damaged by a bomb—but not hit by torpedoes, which was the critical factor in her being repaired in time for Midway—the oiler *Neosho* (AO-23), which had survived being moored right in the middle of the attack on Battleship Row at Pearl Harbor, was sunk, along with the destroyer *Sims* (DD-409.)

At the end of the second day of battle, the air groups on both sides were severely depleted with extensive losses, with *Lexington* sinking and *Shokaku* out of action. Both commanders, Rear Admiral Frank “Jack” Fletcher and Vice Admiral Takeo Takagi, opted to withdraw, which resulted in years of criticism of both.

Samuel J. Cox  
Director of Naval History



## Comments about the 50th Anniversary

*The Battle of the Coral Sea* is one of a series of 21 published and 13 unpublished Combat Narratives of specific naval campaigns produced by the Publication Branch of the Office of Naval Intelligence during World War II. Selected volumes in this series were republished by the Naval Historical Center as part of the Navy's commemoration of the 50th anniversary of World War II. Regrettably, this was not one of them.

The then Director of Naval History Dean C. Allard wrote the following in introducing the reprints:

The Combat Narratives were superseded long ago by accounts such as Samuel Eliot Morrison's *History of the United States Navy Operations in World War II* that could be more comprehensive and accurate because of the abundance of American, Allied, and enemy source materials that became available after 1945. But the Combat Narratives continue to be of interest and value since they demonstrate the perceptions of naval operations during the war itself. Because of the contemporary, immediate view offered by these studies, they are well suited for republications in the 1990s as veterans, historians, and the American public turn their attention once again to a war that engulfed much of the world a half century ago.

The Combat Narrative program originated in a directive issued in February 1942 by Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, that instructed the Office of Naval Intelligence to prepare and disseminate these studies. A small team composed primarily of professionally trained writers and historians produced the narratives. The authors based their accounts on research and analysis of the available primary source material, including action reports and war diaries, augmented by interviews with individual participants. Since the narratives were classified Confidential during the war, only a few thousand copies were published at the time, and their distribution was primarily restricted to commissioned officers in the Navy.





Copy No 188

COMBAT NARRATIVES

---

---

# The Battle of the Coral Sea

*Consisting of the actions at Tulagi,  
May 4th; off Misima, May 7th; and  
in the Coral Sea on May 8th, 1942*

~~U. S. Confidential~~



~~British Secret~~

Office of Naval Intelligence  
U. S. Navy





# COMBAT NARRATIVES

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

*Consisting of the actions at Tulagi, May 4th;  
off Misima, May 7th; and  
in the Coral Sea on May 8th, 1942*

~~U.S. Confidential - British Secret~~ [declassified]

Publication Section, Combat Intelligence Branch

OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE

UNITED STATES NAVY

1943

NAVY DEPARTMENT

Office of Naval Intelligence  
Washington, D. C.

*January 8, 1943.*

Combat Narratives are a series of studies of United States naval operations of the current war for the information of officers. They are based upon official documents and contain not only an account of the several actions but also a series of charts and illustrations which should assist the understanding of these events.

Material printed herein is *Confidential* [declassified] and should be guarded (1) in circulation and custody of the Narratives and (2) in avoiding discussion of their contents with or within the hearing of any others than commissioned or warrant officers.

/s/ Harold C. Train  
REAR ADMIRAL, U.S.N.,  
*Director of Naval Intelligence.*

## Foreword



*A near hit off the starboard bow of a Zuikaku class carrier.*

*January 8, 1943.*

Combat Narratives have been prepared by the Publication Section of the Combat Intelligence Branch of the Office of Naval Intelligence for the information of the officers of the United States Navy.

The data on which these studies are based are those official documents which are suitable for a confidential publication. This material has been collated and presented in chronological order.

In perusing these narratives, the reader should bear in mind that while they recount in considerable detail the engagements in which our forces participated, certain underlying aspects of these operations must be kept in a secret category until after the end of the war.

It should be remembered also that the observations of men in battle are sometimes at variance. As a result, the reports of commanding officers may differ although they participated in the same action and shared a common purpose. In general, Combat Narratives represent a reasoned interpretation of these discrepancies. In those instances where views cannot be reconciled, extracts from the conflicting evidence are reprinted.

Thus, an effort has been made to provide accurate and, within the above-mentioned limitations, complete narrative with charts covering raids, combats, joint operations, and battles in which our Fleets have engaged in the current war. It is hoped that these narratives will afford a clear view of what has occurred, and form a basis for a broader understanding which will result in ever more successful operations.

*/s/ E.J. King*

*ADMIRAL, U.S.N.,*

*Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations.*



# Contents

Page

<b>The Battle of the Coral Sea</b>	1
Our forces joined	3
<b>The Action at Tulagi on May 4th</b>	5
Observations	8
Events Between Tulagi and Misima	8
<b>The Action off Misima, May 7th</b>	11
The Air Groups	11
The <i>Lexington</i> group	12
The <i>Yorktown</i> group	13
Combat air patrol on May 7th	14
Results of the 7th	16
<b>The Action of May 8th</b>	17
The <i>Yorktown</i> group	17
The <i>Lexington</i> group	19
Air attack on our task force	20
Combat air patrol on the 8th	21
The fighters	21
The scout bombers (SBDs)	22
Attack on the <i>Yorktown</i>	23
Experiences of ships with the <i>Yorktown</i>	24
<i>Astoria</i>	24
<i>Portland</i>	25
<i>Chester</i>	26
<i>Hammann</i>	26
<i>Russell</i>	26
<i>Aylwin</i>	27
Attack on the <i>Lexington</i>	28
Experiences of ships with the <i>Lexington</i>	29
<i>Minneapolis</i>	29
<i>New Orleans</i>	30
<i>Phelps</i>	30
<i>Dewey</i>	30
<i>Morris</i>	31
<i>Anderson</i>	31
Sinking of the <i>Lexington</i>	32
<b>Conclusions</b>	39
<b>Appendix</b>	41
Rescue of <i>Yorktown</i> pilots from Guadalcanal	41
Loss of the <i>Neosho</i> and <i>Sims</i>	42
Enemy aircraft attack on the support force	46
Results of a direct hit on the <i>Yorktown</i>	48
Designations and symbols of United States ships and naval aircraft	49





# Charts and Illustrations

(*Coral Sea*)

Chart:	Southwest Pacific	(facing p. 1)
Illustration:	A near hit off the starboard bow of a <i>Zuikaku</i> class carrier	Foreword
Chart:	Task Force FOX track 4–8 May, 1942	2
Illustration:	Torpedo planes attacking the <i>Shoho</i>	20
Illustration:	Effects of a hit on <i>Lexington</i> gun gallery	27
Illustration:	Explosion rocks the <i>Lexington</i>	28
Illustration:	Abandoning the <i>Lexington</i>	32
Illustrations:	<i>Lexington</i> survivors rescued by cruiser	35
Illustrations:	Grumman “Wildcat” and Japanese Zero fighters	40

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

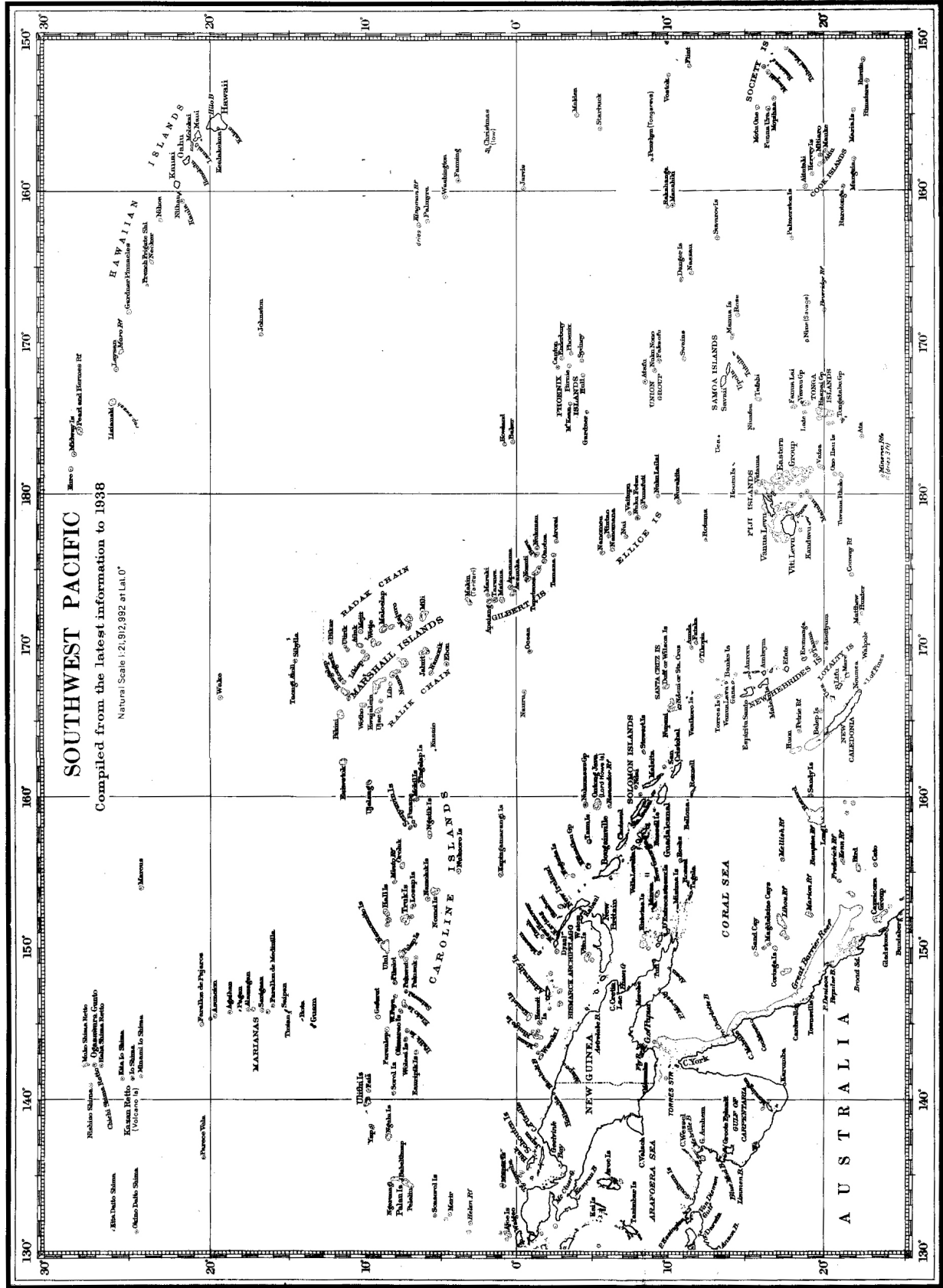


Chart - Southwest Pacific.

# THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

*May 4th to May 8th*

The Battle of the Coral Sea was the first major engagement in naval history in which the issue was decided without surface ships having exchanged a shot. It was purely an air action, with each opponent seeking to gain the upper hand by depriving the other of naval air support. Adding to the novelty was the fact that both forces sought to accomplish the same thing at the same time by the same means. The resultant overlapping found our carrier groups striking the enemy carriers at virtually the same instant that the Japanese carrier-based planes were attacking the *Lexington* and *Yorktown*.

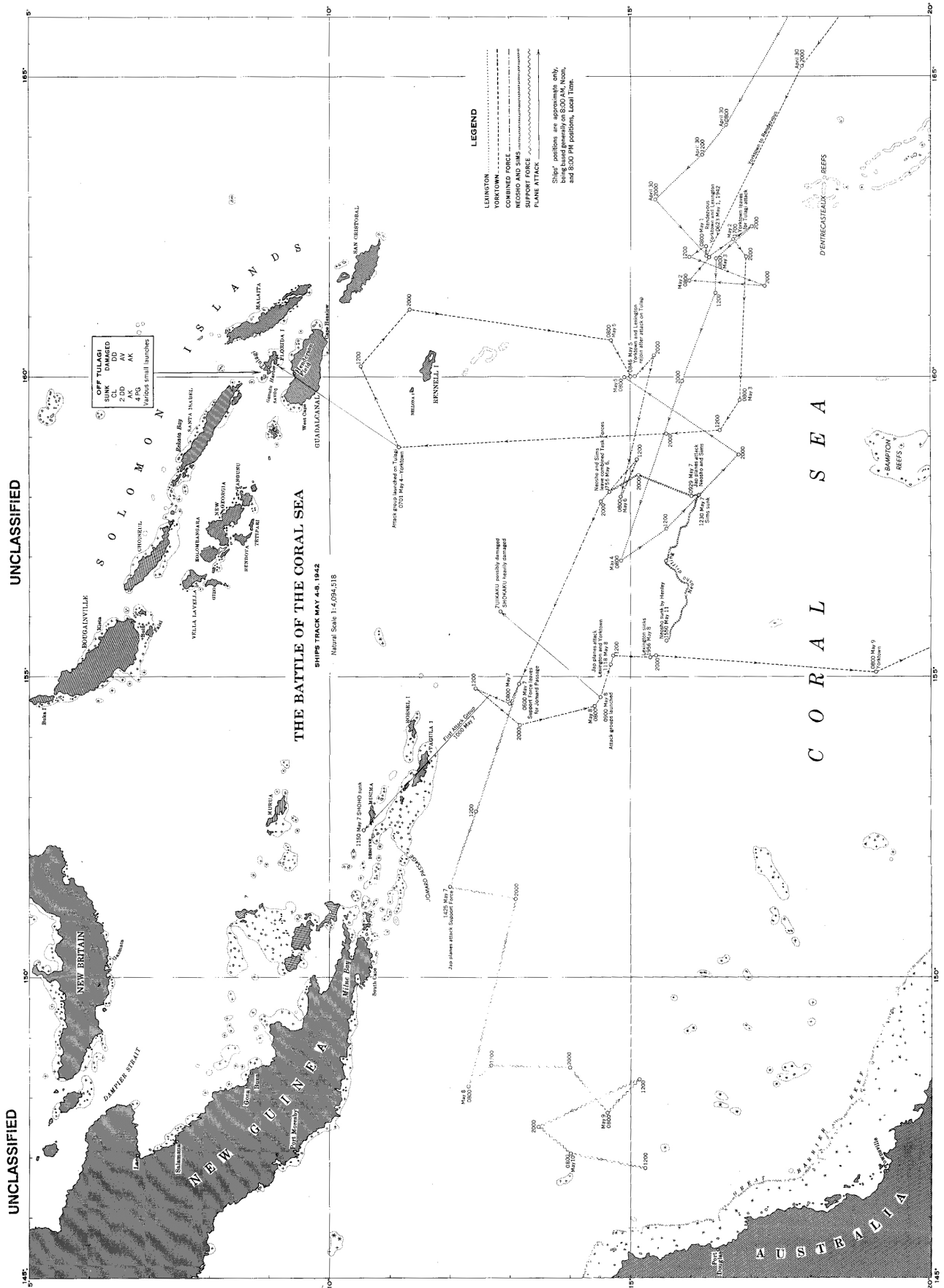
Our air attack at Lae and Salamaua, on March 10, 1942, hindered but did not halt the southward tide of Japanese conquest. In spite of ship losses, the New Guinea ports remained in enemy hands, and the outlook grew progressively worse. Japanese armies overran Bataan Peninsula on April 9th. Corregidor fell on the 6th of May. Farther westward, the American General Stilwell and his men had been driven out of Burma by early May, exposing India to attack. Our bombing of Tokyo and the other Japanese centers of war industry on April 18th, while cheering, was only a nuisance raid. By mid-April the Japanese were moving forces through the Mandates in preparation for a renewal of the offensive. Their holds in the New Guinea-New Britain-Solomon Islands area put them in a position to threaten all Melanesia and Australia itself.

At that time the Japanese were known to have bases at the following places: Rabaul and Gasmata, New Britain; Kavieng, New Ireland; Salamaua and Lae, New Guinea; Watom, Ulu, and Dyaul Islands; Kieta and Buin on Bougainville Island, and on Buka and Faisi Islands in the Solomons.

It was estimated that a total of 53 land and seaplanes were operating from two airdromes at Rabaul and 49 land planes from fields at Lae and Salamaua. The existence of air fields at Gasmata and Kieta also had been confirmed. Enemy air enforcements were believed en route through the Marianas and Marshalls.

With regard to shipping, Rabaul was the principal port for convoys, with lesser activity at Kavieng, Watom, Ulu, Dyaul, Lae, and Salamaua.

Enemy combatant units, operating almost exclusively in the Rabaul area, were few, including an occasional aircraft carrier transporting planes, a submarine tender and 3 or more submarines, a seaplane tender, and several light cruisers, destroyers and gunboats. However, considerable enemy strength had been gathered at Palau and Truk in the Mandates, obviously preparing to move southward. These reinforcements were estimated to include 3 carriers, 2 or 3 battleships, 3 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers, 16 destroyers, a submarine tender, 6 submarines, 2 converted seaplane tenders, 2 mine layers, 8 gunboats, 9 transports or cargo ships and 8 merchantmen.



Task Force FOX track 4-8 May, 1942.

It was felt that the enemy would commence major operations in the Rabaul area about April 28th, with the objective being a sea-borne invasion of Port Moresby, or the Lower Solomons, or both.

After the Lae-Salamaua attack Task Force FOX<sup>1</sup> had remained in the Coral Sea area. Task Force BAKER had returned to Pearl Harbor, where on April 2d Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch relieved Vice Admiral Wilson Brown as its commander. The latter force left Pearl Harbor on April 16th and was proceeding to a rendezvous near Christmas Island when orders were received from the Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Fleet, to divert course to the Coral Sea area, join with Task Force FOX and meet the new Japanese threat.

### OUR FORCES JOINED

Task Forces BAKER and FOX made contact on May 1st at latitude 16°16' S., longitude 162°20' E. Rear Admiral Frank J. Fletcher, commander of Task Force FOX, had been given command of the combined forces. He immediately directed Task Force BAKER to join a reinforcing group consisting of the *Chicago*, *Perkins*, and *Tippecanoe*, at latitude 16°00' S., longitude 161°45' E. Admiral Fletcher desired that as much fuel as possible be taken out of the *Tippecanoe* before she was sent back to Efate, in accordance with CINCPAC's orders. Having fueled, Task Force BAKER was to rejoin Task Force FOX the following day, which it did.

Task Force FOX, meanwhile, had been fueling from another available oiler, the *Neosho*, and was topped off on the 2d. About this time Admiral Fletcher received intelligence reports indicating that the Japanese might begin an advance on Port Moresby very soon. Knowing that the ships in his command were too far south to engage the enemy should they move, he inquired as to the fuel status of Task Force BAKER. The answer was that Task Force BAKER did not expect to complete fueling before noon of the 4th, and Admiral Fletcher thereupon directed Admiral Fitch to fuel his destroyers while pursuing a northwesterly course at night, and to rejoin Task Force FOX at daylight on May 4th, at latitude 15°00' S., longitude 157°00' E. This was the same rendezvous that had previously been arranged with additional reinforcing units consisting of H. M. A. S. *Australia* and H. M. A. S. *Hobart* of the Anzac Squadron.

Before the two task forces separated on May 2d a *Yorktown* scout plane sighted an enemy submarine on the surface 32 miles north of our formation. The submarine dived but surfaced again and was depth-charged by three planes and possibly sunk. However, the proximity of the submarine to our ships indicated that she had sighted them, and subsequent radio interceptions pointed to the probability of our position being reported to the enemy.

After separating from Admiral Fitch's force on the 2d, Task Force FOX continued to the northwestward throughout the night and again fueled destroyers from the *Neosho* on the 3d. Admiral Fletcher intended to fuel all ships requiring it on the 4th after rendezvous with Task Force BAKER and the ships of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Task force numbers have been omitted from Combat Narratives for reasons of security. In place of these numbers will be found the Navy flag names for the first letter of the surname of the commanding officer of a task force. However, since the names of the admirals commanding the two task forces in the Coral Sea begin with the same letter, the word "Baker" will be used in this instance to denote the task force commanded by Rear Admiral A. W. Fitch, to avoid confusion and because he relieved Vice Admiral Wilson Brown.

Anzac Squadron. However, at 1900 on May 3d he received intelligence reports from Commander Southwest Pacific Forces indicating that the Japanese had begun to occupy Florida Island in the Solomons, going ashore from transports in Tulagi Harbor.

How Admiral Fletcher regarded this information is well illustrated by the words he used in his action report: "This was just the kind of report we had been waiting 2 months to receive."

Task Force FOX piled on steam and headed for Tulagi. Not wishing to miss what promised to be an excellent opportunity to hit the enemy, Admiral Fletcher did not wait to be joined by the rest of the ships at his command. However, he detached the *Neosho*, with the *Russell* as escort, and directed her to proceed to the point which had been arranged for the rendezvous of the 4th and inform all ships that a new rendezvous would be made at latitude 15°00' S., longitude 160°00' E., at daylight on May 5th.

Besides the carrier *Yorktown* (flag) Task Force FOX at this time consisted of the heavy cruisers *Astoria*, *Chester*, and *Portland*, and the destroyers *Hammann*, *Anderson*, *Perkins*, *Walke*, *Morris*, and *Sims*.



# THE ACTION AT TULAGI

*May 4*

By 0700 on May 4th Task Force FOX had reached a point about 100 miles southwest of Guadalcanal Island, at latitude 11°10' S., longitude 158°49' E.<sup>2</sup> Weather conditions were unfavorable for flying. A frontal zone extending east and west covered Guadalcanal and the area to the south for a distance of 70 miles. Showers from cumulo-nimbus and strato-cumulus clouds were encountered in the morning and scattered squalls in the afternoon, so that visibility was limited between the carrier and Guadalcanal. Wind gusts varying in forces from 17 to 35 knots somewhat hampered the planes.

By 0701 the cruisers had launched an inner air patrol and the *Yorktown* began launching a combat air patrol of six fighters (F4F-3), followed by the attack group. A combat air patrol of six planes, working in three shifts, was maintained throughout the day. Lt. Comdr. Oscar Pederson was commander of the *Yorktown* air group. The fighters belonged to Fighting Squadron FORTY-TWO, commanded by Lt. Comdr. Charles R. Fenton.

The attack group was composed as follows: 12 torpedo planes (TBD) of Torpedo Squadron FIVE, under Lt. Comdr. Joe Taylor; 13 scout planes (SBD) of Scouting Squadron FIVE, under Lt. Comdr. William O. Burch; and 15 bombers (SBD) of Bombing Squadron FIVE, under Lt. Wallace C. Short.

All torpedo planes were armed with Mark 13 torpedoes, the depth setting 10 feet, and all scout planes and bombers with Mark 13 1,000-pound bombs. The same armament was used in all attacks.

Squadrons proceeded independently, the scouts arriving first and beginning their attacks at 0845. They found in Tulagi Harbor and adjacent Gavutu Harbor two large cargo ships or transports, a smaller cargo ship, four gun boats, two destroyers, one light cruiser of the *Jintsu* class, a large seaplane tender, numerous small patrol boats and launches and five seaplanes moored off Makambo Island. While approaching the objective at 17,000 feet, the squadron commander also had seen what he believed to be a destroyer heading northward at high speed from the vicinity of the West Cape, Guadalcanal. This ship was not seen again, although a search was made.

The scouts selected for their target a light cruiser and two destroyers which were all moored together. Bombs were released at an altitude of 2,500 feet, after 70° dives. Four sure hits and one probable were claimed. Heavy but ineffectual anti-aircraft fire was encountered. There were no casualties. By 1001 the first of these planes had landed back aboard the carrier.

Arriving on the scene at 0850, the torpedo planes attacked shortly after the scouts. Seven aimed their torpedoes at the three nested warships previously attacked by the scouts, scoring three hits. Soon afterward the two destroyers sank and the light cruiser beached herself and sank to deck level. One

---

<sup>2</sup> The force remained to the southward of Guadalcanal throughout the attack following a zigzag course in a northeasterly direction. The *Yorktown* changed course and speed according to doctrine, with the screening vessels maintaining position on her in disposition "Victor."

plane failed to release its torpedo. Three other planes attacked a large cargo ship but failed to score any hits, two of their torpedoes exploding on the beach. The last two planes obtained two hits on another cargo ship, which was dead in the water when they departed. The ship was not visible some time later and it was assumed that she had gone down as pilots reported seeing a sunken ship's masts above water. All torpedo drops were made individually from an altitude of about 50 feet and at ranges varying between 400 and 500 yards. After dropping, the torpedo planes strafed small ships in the harbor. They were subject to heavy but ineffectual antiaircraft fire.

The 15 bombers divided into 3 equal sections upon arriving at the objective and commenced attacking at 0900. One division aimed at a cargo ship but obtained no hits and no misses closer than 30 feet. They then strafed a seaplane taking off from Makambo Island. It crashed and burned. The second division scored 1 possible hit and several near hits on a seaplane tender as it was getting underway. Three planes of the third division also attacked the seaplane tender, obtaining 1 sure and 1 possible hit. The other 2 planes aimed at a cargo ship and a destroyer with no success. All dives were made downwind from about 10,000 feet and releases from 2,500 feet. The planes were taken under fire from ships and from Makambo Island while attacking the seaplane.

Serviceable planes of the first group were rearmed and refueled immediately upon returning to the *Yorktown*, and at 1106 a second group was sent out to the attack. This time there were 14 bombers, 13 scouts, and 11 torpedo planes, the squadrons proceeding independently as before. The bombers located 3 gunboats fleeing from Tulagi about 5 miles east-northeast of Savo Island. Dividing into 3 sections of 5, 5, and 4, they began diving on the gunboats at 1145. The first division took the rearmost ship, which was the largest, and blew her to pieces with 1 direct hit and 3 near hits. The second division attacked the next ship in line and likewise blew her to bits with a direct hit. The third division was not so fortunate with the leading ship in the column. This gunboat used evasive tactics, turning sharply while the planes were diving, and the nearest bomb was a near hit. One of the 4 planes encountered cloud interference and did not drop its bomb. He later attacked a seaplane tender and reported that the vessel slowed down as a result of a near hit. Several planes, meanwhile, had strafed the remaining gunboat which beached herself shortly afterward.

The scouts covered the area to the west and northwest of Florida Island. Their sightings included a cargo ship standing out of Tulagi Harbor, and a seaplane tender and destroyer heading to the northwest between Tulagi and Savo Island. At 1240 they dived on the seaplane tender, making two sure hits and one probable. Two of our planes were damaged by the ship's antiaircraft fire which was heavy and accurate, but both were able to return to the carrier. The undamaged planes next attacked small launches in the harbor, sinking several and damaging others. They also shot down an enemy seaplane which attacked them.

The torpedo planes likewise attacked the seaplane tender and destroyer between Tulagi and Savo Island. Six of them concentrated on the tender, approaching on its starboard bow. Drops were made from between 2,000 and 3,000 yards out. The vessel increased speed and began turning to starboard as the planes approached. No hits were made. An enemy float plane which attacked our planes during

their approach was pursued to Makambo Island, where it landed under the covering fire of a shore-based anti-aircraft battery.

The rest of the torpedo planes attacked the tender 5 minutes after the first six. The ship turned sharply to port as they approached on her starboard bow and no hits were made. Drops were made at ranges from 1,000 to 1,500 yards. All torpedo planes encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire, particularly from machine guns.

One torpedo plane failed to rendezvous for the return to the carrier. This plane, able to transmit on its radio but not to receive, became lost, ran out of fuel, and landed in the water. A search by the *Perkins* failed to locate it.

Pilots returning from the second attack mentioned that enemy seaplanes had been interfering with their work, and at 1340 the *Yorktown* launched 4 fighters for the purpose of destroying these pests. The fighters were followed at 1430 by a third attack group, consisting of 12 scouts and 9 bombers.

Searching the Tulagi area, the fighters encountered three enemy single-float seaplanes and shot them all down into the water. They then attacked a destroyer heading away from Tulagi at high speed, making two runs from astern down the fore-and-aft axis of the ship, followed by two runs from abeam, aiming first at the water line and then at the bridge. In all, about 4,500 rounds were expended on the destroyer, and the effect of the .50-caliber bullets was noteworthy. The tracers started small fires and the armor-piercing bullets seemed to penetrate the ship's hull readily. When last seen the destroyer was leaving a wake of oil. Two fighters became lost while returning to the carrier and force landed on the south coast of Guadalcanal Island. Both pilots were rescued that night by the *Hammann*.<sup>3</sup>

The 12 scout planes of the third attack group reached Tulagi Harbor at 1530, and dive-bombed a cargo ship. The vessel got under way after receiving 1 hit and several near hits. Bombs were released at an altitude of about 2,500 feet. Before leaving, the planes strafed and sank several small launches in the harbor and a gunboat just outside.

The bombers sighted the already much-attacked seaplane tender and the destroyer which had been strafed by the fighters, after following the oil slick left by the latter. All concentrated on the seaplane tender, but by radical maneuvering the ship avoided all bombs, although two fell very close and the remainder within 50 yards. This was the final phase, and the last plane had landed aboard the *Yorktown* by 1702.

Analysis of various reports indicated that the following results had been achieved:

*Damage to the enemy.*

Ships sunk:

2 destroyers.

1 cargo ship.

---

<sup>3</sup> See appendix, p. 41.

4 gunboats.  
Various small launches.  
Ships damaged:  
1 seaplane tender.  
1 cargo ship.

*Our damage.*

2 fighter planes lost; both pilots rescued.  
1 torpedo plane lost  
2 torpedo planes, 3 bombers, 3 scouts damaged by bullets or shrapnel; all repaired.

### **OBSERVATIONS**

The Tulagi operation was disappointing in terms of the ratio of ammunition expended to results achieved. This expenditure included, in all, 22 torpedoes, seventy-six 1,000-pound bombs, 12,570 rounds of .50-caliber and 70,095 rounds of .30-caliber machine-gun bullets. CINCPAC observed that the performance of the *Yorktown* air group, despite their “very creditable willingness and effort to keep after their enemy objective until it was destroyed,” emphasized “how much proficiency drops off in wartime and necessity for target practices at every opportunity in order to keep pilots completely trained in all phases of aerial warfare.”

### **EVENTS BETWEEN TULAGI AND MISIMA**

At 0846 on the morning of May 5th Task Force FOX rendezvoused with Task Force BAKER and the ships of the Anzac Squadron at latitude 15°00' S., longitude 160°00' E., and all units were combined as Task Force FOX. A half hour before, the *Yorktown* had launched four fighters to investigate a radar contact. The fighters found and shot down an enemy four-engine flying boat. The enemy aircraft fell into the sea about 27 miles from the *Yorktown* but only 15 miles from the *Lexington*, and it may have been that the “snooper” was following the group built around the latter. Previous to this, a *Yorktown* scout had sighted an enemy submarine on the surface on a course directly opposite that of his carrier. It was assumed that the enemy observation plane had been directing the submarine toward one of our task forces. However, an air search failed to locate the submarine and she was not heard from again.

All ships, now combined as Task Force FOX, fueled from the *Neosho* on the 5th and 6th. At 0730 on the 6th Admiral Fletcher's operation order to the force was placed in effect. The order outlined the facts concerning enemy movements and probable intentions which had led our ships to the Coral Sea. Roughly speaking, it organized Task Force FOX into an attack group of cruisers and destroyers for the purpose of making day and night attacks on enemy surface craft, and a support group of cruisers and destroyers to protect the carriers, with the proviso that either group might be assigned the mission of the other if circumstances warranted it. There were further ramifications, but the following excerpt from the order is a pretty good example of its marrow: “This force will destroy enemy ships, shipping, and aircraft at favorable opportunities in order to assist in checking further advances by enemy in the New Guinea-Solomon area.”

The task organization of combatant unit was as follows:

Attack group -

Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid:

<i>CA Minneapolis</i>	Capt. Frank J. Lowry.
<i>CA New Orleans</i>	Capt. Howard H. Good.

Rear Admiral William W. Smith:

<i>CA Astoria</i>	Capt. Francis W. Scanland.
<i>CA Chester</i>	Capt. Thomas M. Shock.
<i>CA Portland</i>	Capt. Benjamin Penman.

Capt. Alexander R. Early:

<i>DD Phelps</i>	Lt. Comdr. Edward L. Beck.
<i>DD Dewey</i>	Lt. Comdr. Charles F. Chillingworth, Jr.
<i>DD Farragut</i>	Comdr. George P. Hunter.
<i>DD Aylwin</i>	Lt. Comdr. Robert H. Rogers.
<i>DD Monaghan</i>	Lt. Comdr. William P. Burford.

Support group -

Rear Admiral I. G. Crace, R. N.:

<i>CA Australia</i>	Capt. H. B. Farncomb, R. A. N.
<i>CA Chicago</i>	Capt. Howard D. Bode.
<i>CL Hobart</i>	Capt. H. L. Howden, R. A. N.

Comdr. Francis X. McInerney:

<i>DD Perkins</i>	Lt. Comdr. Walter C. Ford.
<i>DD Walke</i>	Lt. Comdr. Thomas E. Fraser.

Air group -

Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch:

<i>CV Yorktown</i>	Capt. Elliott Buckmaster.
<i>CV Lexington</i>	Capt. Frederick C. Sherman.

Capt. Gilbert C. Hoover:

<i>DD Morris</i>	Comdr. Harry B. Jarrett.
<i>DD Anderson</i>	Lt. Comdr. John K. B. Ginder.
<i>DD Hammann</i>	Comdr. Arnold E. True.
<i>DD Russell</i>	Lt. Comdr. Glenn R. Hartwig.

Operating in conjunction with the combatant ships were a fueling group and a search group. Comdr. John S. Phillips commanded the former, which consisted of the *Neosho* and *Tippecanoe* with the *Sims* and *Worden* as their respective escorts. The search group consisted of the seaplane tender *Tangier* and 12 patrol planes, under Comdr. G. H. DeBaun operating from a base at Noumea, New Caledonia.

The order specified that Task Force FOX was to operate in the Coral Sea about 700 miles south of Rabaul until word was received of an enemy advance. On the 5th, intelligence reports began to come in from CINCPAC and COMSOWESPAC placing a large number of enemy ships in the New Guinea-New Britain-Solomon Islands area. Practically every type of ship was reported, including three aircraft

carriers, but the enemy units were scattered and for a while there seemed to be no common direction of movement. However, by the afternoon of the 6th it was becoming evident that an advance would be made on Port Moresby through Jomard Passage in the Louisiade Archipelago. It was also felt that the Japanese would attempt to establish a base in the Deboyne Islands en route. May 7th or 8th was given as the date on which the enemy advance might begin.

Task Force FOX, meanwhile, because of sea and wind conditions, had been fueling on a southeasterly course. But when Admiral Fletcher got word of the impending Japanese movement he ordered the fueling discontinued and took his force northwestward so that he would be in a position to strike the enemy by daylight of May 7th. The *Neosho* and *Sims* were detached to operate to the southward in accordance with fueling rendezvous provisions. Both were sunk as a result of enemy bombing attacks on the 7th.<sup>4</sup>

By 0600 on the 7th Task Force FOX was at latitude 13°25.5' S., longitude 154°48' E. Admiral Fletcher here detached the support group, plus the *Farragut* sending it ahead to attack enemy transports and light cruisers which were reported to be heading for Port Moresby through Jomard Passage. The support group reached a position about 110 miles southeast of the South Cape, New Guinea, later in the day, where it successfully beat off an attack by enemy bombers and torpedo planes.<sup>5</sup>

---

4 See appendix, p. 42.

5 See appendix, p. 46.



# THE ACTION OFF MISIMA

*May 7*

As Task Force FOX moved northward on the morning of the 7th, Admiral Fletcher conducted air searches in an effort to obtain information concerning Japanese ships, particularly carriers, and to locate a suitable objective for attack. It was possible that three enemy carriers were within striking distance, but no word of the movement of these ships had been received since the previous afternoon. Ten *Yorktown* scout planes were detailed to cover the area in the vicinity of Deboyne Island in the Louisiades. At 0845 one of the scouts reported 2 enemy carriers and 4 heavy cruisers at latitude 10°03' S., longitude 152°27' E., on course 140° true at a speed of 18 to 20 knots. Preparations were made to launch the attack groups from both carriers.

The other scouts, meanwhile, met with varying successes. One plane found two enemy heavy cruisers at latitude 10°40' S., longitude 153°15' E. on course 310° at low speed. The ships challenged him with two long flashes on a searchlight. Two scouts each shot down one twin-float monoplane resembling the Kawanishi type 94 torpedo bomber, one near Misima Island and the other at latitude 10°35' S., longitude 156°43' E. There were no other contacts. However, one scout assigned the eastern sector with a median 067° went out only about 165 of his designated 250 miles, turning back because of bad weather. Subsequent events indicated that two carriers, the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, were in the bad weather area not fully searched.

## THE AIR GROUPS

To get back to immediate developments, however, it was decided to launch a combined attack group: objective the two carriers reported by the *Yorktown* scout at 0845 north of Misima Island. The *Lexington* planes began taking off first, at about 0925. There were 10 fighters (F4F), 28 scout bombers (SBD), and 12 torpedo planes (TBD). Eight SBD's were retained over the ship for use as antitorpedo plane patrol.

Beginning at approximately 1014, the *Yorktown* launched 8 fighters (F4F), 24 scout bombers (SBD), and 10 torpedo planes (TBD). The combined attack group thus numbered 92 planes.

Comdr. William B. Ault was the *Lexington* group commander. Heading the fighters, Fighting Squadron TWO, was Lt. Comdr. Paul H. Ramsey; the scouts, Scouting Squadron TWO, Lt. Comdr. Robert E. Dixon; the dive bombers, Bombing Squadron TWO, Lt. Comdr. Weldon L. Hamilton, and the torpedo planes, Torpedo Squadron TWO, Lt. Comdr. James H. Brett. The *Yorktown* group and squadron commanders were the same as at Tulagi.

Weather favored Task Force FOX. The ships were in a frontal area extending east and west. In the early morning there were strato-cumulus clouds, which developed into cumulus, alto-stratus and cirrus by noon. There were, however, sufficient breaks in the clouds to allow planes to be launched and landed without undue difficulty. Visibility was generally limited to 10 or 15 miles, reduced to less

than a mile by several rain squalls. The wind was east to east southeast, blowing at 12 to 22 knots, and increasing in gusts to as much as 30 knots. At sunset there was a pronounced haze, with visibility limited to 4 miles. This frontal area which helped conceal our ships ended about 50 miles to the northward. Beyond, where the enemy lay, the weather was fine, ceiling unlimited, and visibility of 20 miles or more.

The launching was done within 160 miles of the objective, and the combined air attack group was well on its way by 1100 when the *Yorktown* search planes returned to that carrier. It was then discovered that due to an improper arrangement of the pilot's code contact pad that the report of 2 enemy carriers at latitude 10°03' S., longitude 152°27' E. was in error. The pilot actually had seen 2 heavy cruisers and 2 light cruisers and had thought he was reporting these ships to the task force. The improperly adjusted code pad had caused the launching of the attack group on a false mission. Little in the way of official comment is available concerning the reactions to this realization, but it must have been a tense moment. In any case, it was deemed expedient to allow the planes to continue, and this proved a wise decision, for not long afterward information was received from shore-based reconnaissance planes of the Australian command that a carrier, 16 miscellaneous warships and 10 transports had been sighted at latitude 10°34' S., longitude 152°26' E. on course 285°. As is obvious, this position was not far from that given by the unfortunate *Yorktown* scout. At 1123 the word was passed to the attack groups. They changed course slightly, and at approximately 1130 the *Lexington* group, which was leading, made contact with the enemy north of Misima Island.

Before going into details of our attack, it should be pointed out that there are obvious differences in the reports of the two carrier groups concerning the action. For instance, the *Lexington* pilots said that they saw only a carrier, while the *Yorktown* flyers described the enemy force as consisting of a carrier, one very large cruiser, three heavy cruisers and one light cruiser. Moreover, both carrier groups gave the impression that they attacked alone, whereas the times that they "pushed over" were very close together. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that only one enemy carrier was attacked, since the *Yorktown* pilots said that the ship they struck was afire aft when they began their attack.

### ***The Lexington group.***

This is how Captain Sherman, commanding officer of the *Lexington*, reported the tactics of that carrier's planes after an analysis of the statements of pilots participating:

Scouting Squadron TWO, consisting of 10 SBD's loaded with one 500-pound and two 100-pound bombs per plane, attacked first. Two confirmed 500-pound bomb hits were made, one on the enemy carrier's stern about 50 feet from the ramp, and the other in the center of the flight deck about two-thirds of the way aft.

Soon after the scouts released their bombs, Bombing Squadron TWO and Torpedo Squadron TWO made a coordinated attack at 1145. The 16 dive-bombers, all armed with 1,000-pounders, obtained 5 direct hits and the torpedo planes were credited with 9 hits out of 12 drops. This would seem to have been sufficient to destroy any carrier imaginable, and it is a puzzling fact that when the *Yorktown* planes arrived on the scene shortly afterward they reported the enemy "flat top" turning into the wind as

though preparing to launch planes, with only one fire visible from the air and that a small one.

Enemy fighter opposition was encountered by several *Lexington* planes during the attack and withdrawal. Lt. Edward Allen, executive officer of Scouting Squadron TWO, who had won the Navy Cross for his heroic part in the defense of the *Lexington* against Japanese bombers off Rabaul the previous February, was shot down. Another plane of the same squadron, piloted by Lt. (j.g.) Anthony I. Quigley, made a forced landing on Rossel Island after his control wires were shot away. Lieutenant Quigley and his radioman were later rescued by the Australians.

The enemy fighters encountered near the enemy carrier were of the Nakajima type 97. Although extremely maneuverable, these planes were not very effective. Four were shot down by our fighters and rear-seat gunners in the scouts. A fifth enemy aircraft, described as a torpedo plane, also was shot down near the scene of our attack.

With the exception of the two SBD's shot down, the entire *Lexington* group had returned to the carrier and landed by about 1345.

### ***The Yorktown group.***

The estimate of the part played by the *Yorktown* group in attacking the enemy carrier, as reported by Captain Buckmaster, commanding officer, follows:

*Yorktown* planes first sighted the enemy at 1130, at a point about 20 miles northeast of Misima. As mentioned previously, the Japanese force observed included a carrier, a very large cruiser or battleship, 3 heavy cruisers and 1 light cruiser. As our planes approached they saw part of the *Lexington* group attack. The enemy ships maneuvered violently at high speed. After the *Lexington* planes departed, the enemy carrier ceased maneuvering and turned into the wind, "a perfect target." At 1147 Scouting Squadron FIVE, followed closely by Bombing Squadron FIVE, made their dives down wind from an altitude of 18,000 feet. There were 24 SBD's, all armed with 1,000-pound bombs, in the 2 squadrons, and they claimed 14 direct hits. So great was the destruction that the last bomber pulled away and released his bomb at the light cruiser. He made a direct hit on the stern, and the ship sank rapidly.

Torpedo Squadron FIVE, coming in low, found the enemy carrier listing to starboard and burning fiercely. Only a small section of the bow was visible through the smoke, and only 2 light guns were seen to be firing. Utilizing the smoke, the torpedo planes approached very close and scored 10 hits out of as many drops. Within 3 minutes after the last torpedo had struck, the enemy carrier disappeared beneath the surface. She subsequently was identified as the *Shoho*, but was erroneously called the *Ryukaku* for some time.

No fighter opposition was encountered during the *Yorktown's* attack.

Later, however, both bombers and torpedo planes were attacked by about six Nakajima type 97 fighters and three other planes of the scout bomber type. Scouting Squadron FIVE planes engaged two of the enemy scouts and made hits that caused them to break off the fight.

Our escorting fighters, meanwhile, had been divided in half, four assigned to our dive bombers and four

to the torpedo planes. They engaged the enemy and shot down three fighters and one scout bomber. Two other enemy planes were damaged.

The *Yorktown* group, minus one dive bomber, had landed aboard by 1338. The missing plane was last seen on the return flight when it broke off to attack an enemy plane.

Consideration was given to the idea of launching a second attack against enemy ships which had been reported in the Deboyne Island area, but this was not done because there were indications that other enemy carriers, not yet located, were in the vicinity.

### COMBAT AIR PATROL ON THE 7TH

While our attack groups were sinking the *Shoho*, Task Force FOX maintained a combat air patrol. Planes from both carriers were controlled by the *Lexington* fighter director. The protecting planes were kept busy. Radar picked up the first "bogey" at 0903, a single plane, and *Lexington* fighters were vectored out to intercept, but failed to make contact. At 1049 the *Yorktown* also put a combat patrol into the air, and planes of one or the other carrier were kept aloft all day.

At 1114 a section of *Yorktown* fighters located and shot down an enemy four-engined flying boat about 40 miles from the task force.

When it was decided, after the sinking of the *Shoho*, not to send out another attack group until more had been learned of the two other enemy carriers believed operating nearby, it also was decided to rely upon our shore-based aircraft to find these carriers. But as the day wore on and nothing was reported, Admiral Fletcher, after an estimate of the situation, determined to head northwestward during the night, it being expected that the enemy would pass through Jomard Passage before morning, heading for Port Moresby in force, probably accompanied by a carrier.

The situation was altered, however, by subsequent developments. Bogeys continued to appear on the radar screen, and at 1653 fighters were vectored out to investigate a plane bearing 315°, distance 18 miles. The fighters failed to intercept, probably because of the increasingly poor visibility, although this plane came within 9 miles of the task force and was identified as an enemy seaplane by surface lookouts.

The *Yorktown* fighters were not equipped with radar identification means, and, because of this, considerable effort was wasted. Fighters were being sent out continually to investigate planes which proved to be friendly.

A large group of enemy planes was detected at 1747 bearing 145°, distance 18 miles. Soon afterward the *Yorktown* launched additional fighters and seven were sent out to intercept the approaching enemy formation. On the way they passed over several enemy planes which quickly disappeared in the haze. Two of our fighters broke formation to give chase and one of them was never heard from again. The remaining five sighted a group of Aichi type 99 dive bombers and shot one down before losing contact in the murk. *Lexington* fighters, about the same time, shot down five enemy planes from a formation encountered at approximately the same position. *Yorktown* pilots reported seeing five oil patches on

the surface of the sea, which marked their end. The *Lexington* described the downed enemy planes as Zero fighters.

Admiral Fletcher viewed the presence of the enemy aircraft near our ships late in the day as an attempted attack, and was of the opinion that at least 15 of them had been shot down in all.

The *Yorktown* lost two fighters and the *Lexington* one from the combat patrols flown that evening. One *Yorktown* plane, mentioned above, broke formation and simply disappeared. The other became lost in the general melee and all efforts to direct him back to the carrier proved fruitless. At 2028<sup>6</sup> he was given directions to Tagula Island, but so far as is known did not make it. The lost *Lexington* fighter, piloted by Lt. (j.g.) Paul G. Baker, is believed to have collided with a Zero in combat.

The combat patrols were landed well after sunset. In the case of the *Yorktown*, this was begun at 1858 and completed at 1930. While the fighters were in the landing circle, about 1800, three enemy planes flew by on the starboard side flashing lights. As they crossed the bow to port a *Yorktown* fighter opened fire on them without visible effect. Again, at 1910, enemy planes appeared over the *Yorktown*, which took them under small caliber fire briefly and drove them off.

There is some confusion among the different reports concerning the appearance of enemy planes over our task force. Captain Buckmaster of the *Yorktown* said that one enemy plane was downed by the fire of an unspecified screening ship, and that one of his carrier's planes was damaged by the firing.

Captain Sherman of the *Lexington* reported that planes also flew about his ship and that he opened fire upon receiving word from the *Yorktown* that they were hostile. He stated that the enemy planes mistook our force for their own, and that radar later showed them moving off only 30 miles to the eastward, circling, and apparently landing on a Japanese carrier.

At 2000 Task Force FOX was in latitude 13°10' S., longitude 154°13' E., on course 115° true.

In the morning repeated despatches from the *Neosho* had been received telling of the bombing attack on that ship and the *Sims*. The despatches, however, had not indicated whether or not the enemy planes making the attack were carrier-based. Such information would have been extremely valuable to Task Force FOX, since the *Neosho* and *Sims* were operating to the southeastward of the main body. Thus, after the twilight incident of enemy planes circling our carriers and being tracked to what must have been a carrier or carriers to the northeastward, Admiral Fletcher was left in doubt as to where the enemy lay in greatest force. On the basis of the radar information, he considered momentarily the idea of delivering a night surface attack on the enemy ships to the northeastward. "Had there been assurance of our surface force making contact, it might have been advisable for the carriers to retire to the southward," the Admiral later reported. "But had the surface force failed to make contact during the night, they might have met a disastrous air attack next day. All things considered, the best plan seemed to be to keep our force concentrated and prepare for a battle with enemy carriers next morning."

---

6 At 1700 clocks were set to minus 11 zone time. All times previously given on the 7th apply to minus 10 zone time.

The *Monaghan* was detached during the night of the 7th–8th to search for survivors of the *Neosho* and *Sims*.

This left, besides the *Yorktown* and *Lexington*, five cruisers and seven destroyers, namely, the *Astoria*, *Chester*, *Portland*, *Minneapolis*, *New Orleans*, *Phelps*, *Dewey*, *Aylwin*, *Morris*, *Anderson*, *Hamman*, and *Russell*.

### RESULTS OF THE 7TH

A combination of the estimates by Captains Sherman and Buckmaster of the damage dealt and received on the 7th showed the following:

#### *Damage to the enemy.*

##### Ships sunk:

- 1 aircraft carrier (*Shoho*), with most of her personnel and planes.
- 1 light cruiser, with many of her personnel.

##### Planes shot down:

- 13 fighters, type 97 and Zero.
- 3 torpedo planes, type 94.
- 2 scout bombers.
- 1 four-engined patrol plane, type 97.

#### *Our damage.*

##### Planes shot down:

- 3 scout bombers (SBD), crew of one later saved.
- 3 fighters (F4F).



## THE ACTION OF MAY 8TH

The Battle of the Coral Sea reached its climax on the 8th of May with the exchange of blows between our air attack groups and those of the enemy. The actual fighting time was extremely brief. Therefore, in order that each phase of the action may receive full attention, separate treatment will be given those that conflict in time.

Task Force FOX continued to the southwestward during the night of the 7th and by 0800 of the 8th was at latitude 14°25' S., longitude 154°31' E., on course 125° true.

The location of the carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* remained the principal concern of our force. Intelligence reports received during the night had indicated that the enemy invasion fleet was retiring to the northward, but nothing specific was heard about the two Japanese carriers. It was assumed that they had remained in the Coral Sea to settle the problem of air control preliminary to returning with their transports to attack Port Moresby.

Because of doubt concerning the enemy carrier's whereabouts, it was decided to conduct a 360° dawn search, 200 miles in the northern semicircle and 150 miles in the southern semicircle. *Lexington* scouts took off at 0625. At 0820 Lt. (j.g.) Joseph Smith of Scouting Squadron TWO made contact with a formation of two carriers, four heavy cruisers, and several destroyers about 170 miles to the northeastward, standing south at high speed. The position was latitude 11°51' S., longitude 156°04' E. At 0822 a radio interception indicated that our formation had been sighted almost simultaneously by the enemy.

The weather, which had aided our force the previous day, now helped the Japanese. Ceiling and visibility were almost unlimited in our vicinity. Clouds were few, there were no rain squalls, and the wind was blowing at 15 or 18 knots from the southeast. Approximately the same conditions held throughout the day. On the other hand, the Japanese ships were operating in the frontal area which had shielded us the day before. The visibility there varied from 2 to 15 miles. Cumulus, alto-cumulus, and cirrus clouds covered the area. Intermittent squalls made things worse.

Admiral Fletcher turned over tactical command of the task force to Admiral Fitch, commander air, at 0907. The attack groups already had begun taking off, the first planes leaving the *Yorktown* about 0900. All scouts and bombers were equipped with 1,000-pound bombs.

### ***The Yorktown group.***

The *Yorktown* attack group went first. It consisted of 6 fighters, 7 scouts, 17 dive bombers, and 9 torpedo planes. The scouts and bombers proceeded toward the objective at 17,000 feet, accompanied by 2 fighters. The dive bombers sighted the enemy first at about 1032. There were 2 carriers, about 6 or 8 miles apart. The combined escort consisted of 1 battleship or very large cruiser, 3 heavy cruisers

and 4 destroyers. Their course was 190° true.

By 1049 the scouts and bombers were in position to attack but circled to wait for the slower torpedo planes. One enemy carrier headed for a rain squall; the other turned into the wind and began launching planes. At 1058 the torpedo planes were in position and a coordinated attack was begun on the carrier that had launched planes. Six sure bomb hits, three possible, and many near hits were made.

The SBD's were attacked by enemy fighters during their dives and after their pull-outs. In the ensuing action Scouting Squadron FIVE shot down four fighters and Bombing Squadron FIVE accounted for seven others, while both squadrons damaged several other enemy planes. Our planes then used cloud cover to escape.

The fogging of bombsights and windshields handicapped our SBD planes.

One of the dive bomber pilots who scored a hit was Lt. John J. Powers. This officer, according to his fellow pilots, had sworn previously to get a hit at any cost and made good his promise by diving to within several hundred feet of the enemy carrier's flight deck before releasing his bomb. It was believed that his plane was destroyed by the blast of his own missile. His extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty were noted by President Roosevelt and resulted in a posthumous award of the Congressional Medal of Honor. One other *Yorktown* SBD was lost, but available reports do not make clear how this came about.

Meanwhile, the torpedo planes had made their approach from the southeast. As the SBD's attacked, the enemy carrier began a left turn, then swung abruptly to the right. It was during this turn to the right that the torpedoes were dropped. Of nine dropped, three and possibly four were hits. Three were seen to make erratic runs. The last two pilots to attack stated that the first torpedo struck the carrier on the port bow and laid it open from waterline to flight deck. The second and third torpedoes hit between the bow and the midships section. The whole side of the carrier from the bow aft for 50 or 100 feet was afire. Another small fire was visible on the starboard quarter. When the carrier was last seen, about 15 minutes after the attack, the fires were still burning fiercely. The torpedo planes also made use of convenient cloud cover in rendezvousing and retiring, and the fact that none was shot down was attributed largely to weather conditions.

The four fighters accompanying the *Yorktown* torpedo planes drove off an attack by six Zeroes during the approach and permitted the TBD's to drop unmolested. Three enemy Zeroes and one enemy scout plane were shot down during our attack and on the return trip an enemy torpedo plane was destroyed. Our fighters also attacked two enemy dive bombers while returning, but shortage of fuel forced the Grumman's to limit their pursuit of the enemy and they escaped.

The *Yorktown* began recovering her attack group at 1231 and all the planes were aboard by 1300. During the landings a plane from Bombing Squadron TWO, piloted by Lt. (j.g.) Floyd E. Moan, made a crash landing, striking the island structure in full flight. His plane was badly shot up and his flaps would not operate. Although the SBD was a wreck and was pushed over the side, both Lieutenant Moan and his rear seat man, R. J. Hodgins, seaman second class, recovered.

### ***The Lexington group.***

The *Lexington* attack group originally was composed of 12 torpedo planes, 18 dive bombers, 4 scouts, and 9 fighters. The dive bombers were accompanied by 3 fighters, the torpedo planes by 4 fighters, and the scouts by 2 fighters. The entire force did not attack, however. The 3 fighters escorting the dive bombers lost contact with their charges en route and returned to the carrier. The 18 bombers went on but failed to locate the enemy and returned without striking a blow. One torpedo plane was turned back by engine trouble. The navigational data available to the pilots was none too good, and the visibility was extremely poor.

The remaining 11 torpedo planes, under Commander Brett, joined up with the 4 scouts, which comprised a section led by the *Lexington* group commander, Commander Ault. After flying to the end of their navigational leg without sighting the enemy, these planes, with their combined escort of 6 fighters, began flying a "box." Within a few minutes they entered a clear area. About 20 miles away on the far side of the clearing were enemy ships. At this point Commander Ault tried to pick up the lost dive bombers by radio without success. Soon enemy fighters, Zeros and Me-109's, appeared and were engaged by our fighters. Lt. Noel Gayler, the only survivor of the 4 fighter pilots escorting the torpedo planes, reported that he and the others had accounted for at least 1 and probably more of the enemy fighters.

Lieutenant Gayler took cloud cover during this dogfight. After flying on instruments for about 3 minutes he came out of the clouds at an altitude of 1,000 feet directly above a Japanese carrier accompanied by a cruiser and a destroyer. He circled the carrier twice, unmolested by either planes or anti-aircraft fire, expecting that our torpedo planes or scouts would attack at any minute. The enemy ships apparently did not see Lieutenant Gayler's plane. The carrier showed no evidence of damage. In a few moments another larger group of enemy ships became visible 15 miles to the eastward. Lieutenant Gayler said he saw several ships this time, among them a large one which he took to be a carrier and which was burning and "making a good deal of smoke."

Deciding that our planes had attacked the second group of enemy ships, Lieutenant Gayler began to look for the rendezvous point. Soon he came up with one of our scouts, piloted by Ensign Marvin M. Haschke, and followed it back to the *Lexington*. Ensign Haschke was the sole survivor among the four scouts of Commander Ault's group.

While our fighters were engaging the Japanese fighters, the 4 scouts and 11 torpedo planes attacked together. Radio logs showed that the time of this attack was 1057. They obtained two 1,000-pound bomb and 5 torpedo hits on a carrier of the *Zuikaku* class. When last seen, the enemy carrier was afire and apparently losing headway.

Enemy fighters or fuel shortage accounted for all but one of our attacking scouts, and two of our fighters. One of our torpedo planes also was forced down and lost because of running out of gas. Commander Ault was among those lost. He was in radio communication with the force for some time but could not find his way back and it was not possible to pick him up on the radar screen. Finally, at 1454, he was told that he was "on his own" and to try to find land. He replied:

“O. K. So long, people. Remember we got a 1,000-pound hit on the flat top.”

The last plane of what remained of the attack group landed aboard the *Lexington* about 1400. A group of seven torpedo planes coming in was so short of fuel that they did not execute recognition maneuvers and were fired on briefly by the *Yorktown*.

Both Admiral Fletcher and Admiral Fitch reported the belief that our air attacks had resulted in the severe damaging of one enemy carrier, the *Shokaku*, and the damaging of a second, the *Zuikaku*. CINCPAC, however, pointed out that it was possible that both our air groups had struck the same carrier, the other escaping in the overcast. Captain Sherman expressed the belief that the carrier attacked by the *Lexington* planes had sunk. Captain Buckmaster recorded no official opinion as to whether or not any enemy carrier had been sunk, restricting his report to the number of bomb and torpedo hits scored by the *Yorktown* air group. Subsequent developments showed that neither the *Shokaku* nor the *Zuikaku* had gone down, but that the *Shokaku* had been seriously damaged. If the *Zuikaku* was hurt it was only superficially.



*Two of our torpedo planes maneuver in for the kill as the heavily dive-bombed Shoho goes to destruction in smoke and flames.*

### AIR ATTACK ON OUR TASK FORCE

Radio intercepts had indicated that the Japanese had sighted Task Force FOX about the same time our scouts picked up the enemy formation. There was no doubt that we would be subject to an air attack and all steps were taken to prepare to meet it. In order that he might have complete freedom of action with the cruisers and planes, Admiral Fitch had been given tactical command at 0907. Most ships present had gone to general quarters at dawn, and remained so throughout the day. Combat and antitorpedo plane patrols were maintained. Speed was built up gradually to 25 knots, and this was increased to 30 knots when the enemy attack materialized. Various courses were steered in launching and recovering planes, but the general direction of movement continued to be toward the southeast. Five minutes before the action opened our course was 125° true.

Our ships were in circular disposition “Victor” with the carriers in the center. The *Yorktown* was north of the *Lexington*, and at 1040 adjusted position on the *Lexington* so as not to have the

latter between her and the sun in the event planes approached from the sun. As the enemy attack developed, the *Yorktown* and *Lexington* gradually drew apart as a result of high-speed maneuvering to avoid bombs and torpedoes, so that they were separated by several miles when the action ceased. Without signal, the screening ships nearest each carrier followed. With the *Yorktown* went the *Astoria*, *Portland*, *Chester*, *Russell*, *Hammann*, and *Aylwin*. The *Minneapolis*, *New Orleans*, *Morris*, *Anderson*, *Phelps*, and *Dewey* followed the *Lexington*.

## COMBAT AIR PATROL ON THE 8TH

### *The Fighters.*

The handling of our fighters during the enemy air attack has been the subject of some discussion. The failure of a large number of our fighters to intercept the enemy planes, despite the fact that ample radar warning of their approach was available, has resulted in criticism of the tactics of the task force fighter director, who was in the *Lexington*.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted, however, that no criticism of the *Lexington* fighter director was contained in any of the official action reports of the 8th. Captain Sherman's report, which was compiled without the aid of records lost with his ship, was brief. It said:

“Our combat patrol, under the fighter director, was patrolling at 10,000 feet. Exact altitude of the approaching enemy was not determined, but was known to be over 10,000 feet. The fighters made contact 20-30 miles out but the enemy bombers were at 17,000 feet and the performance of our fighters was not sufficient to gain enough altitude to attack them before they reached the push over point. The bombers were accompanied by 18 protective fighters, which our fighters subsequently engaged in combat and shot down or damaged six.”

Captain Buckmaster of the *Yorktown*, using radio logs, radar plot, and the accounts of pilots from both carriers, compiled the following account of how the enemy attack was met by the combat air patrol:

At 1055 radar showed a very large group of enemy planes approaching, bearing 020°, distance 68 miles. At 1059 all planes on combat patrol were recalled to the vicinity of the carriers. At 1059 four additional fighters were launched, making a total of eight from the *Yorktown* and nine from the *Lexington*.

(Fighters had been kept aloft in rotation since dawn. The cruiser planes also went up during the morning as an inner air patrol, but were recalled when the enemy attack appeared imminent. At 1014 a *Yorktown* fighter located and shot down an enemy four-engine flying boat which evidently had been shadowing our ships from a distance of 20 or 25 miles.)

---

<sup>7</sup> The following statement was made subsequently by an officer in one of the carriers during this action:

“What we wanted to criticize mostly was fighter direction. The *Lexington* fighter director, who was directing fighters for both carriers, had an excellent organization. His physical set-up was good and they were well drilled. He got information and got that information out quickly and accurately. When a large attack was seen to be coming straight in, without any change of bearing, having been picked up at 80 miles at high altitude, he didn't take any action for a while. Apparently he was watching to see what would develop. The fighter director in the *Yorktown* called him and asked him if he knew that the attack was coming in. He said ‘yes.’ Then he pulled in all his fighters. Then he sent them out piecemeal at various altitudes, with the result that, as far as fighter protection is concerned, we might just as well have had no fighters in the air instead of the 17 we had from the two carriers. Many of us are positive that the loss of the *Lexington* was due, specifically and exactly, to the lack of fighter direction.”



At 1102 five *Lexington* fighters were vectored out on 020°, distance 30 miles, at 10,000 feet. Two of them later were told to go low to intercept torpedo planes. The remaining three made contact about 20 miles out, being 1,000 or 2,000 feet below the enemy. One pilot said there were 50 or 60 planes stacked in layers extending from about 10,000 to 13,000 feet, and that approximately a third of them were fighters. At the lowest level, he said, were torpedo planes, then fighters, then dive bombers, then more fighters. Our three fighters attacked this large formation while it was 15 to 20 miles from the fleet. Our two fighters which had been sent low attacked torpedo planes at 1116 when they were within 4 or 5 miles from the fleet.

At 1108 four *Lexington* fighters were vectored out on the same bearing at about 1,000 feet to a distance of 15 miles. Arriving on station without making contact, they asked instructions and were told by the fighter director that our ships were already under air attack and that they should return at 10,000 feet. Although they returned after the attack was over, they were able to shoot down several planes still in the vicinity.

Another two-plane section of *Lexington* fighters was instructed to orbit overhead. It climbed to 12,000 feet, and from that position was able to attack the tail end of the enemy formation.

Four *Yorktown* fighters were kept overhead at eight to ten thousand feet. Two planes failed to intercept before the enemy could push home their attack, but managed to shoot down 1 Zero and 1 dive bomber which already had released its bomb. The other 2 planes of this unit attacked a group of dive bombers as they entered their dives, going down with them and shooting down one before and one after release of their bombs.

Thus, only 3 of our 17 fighters effectively intercepted the enemy prior to delivery of the attack. The others were not in position to attack until after the enemy had commenced or finished their attacks.

In all, *Yorktown* fighters shot down four Zeros and three dive bombers, besides damaging other planes.

No *Yorktown* fighters of the combat patrol were lost. Two *Lexington* fighters were shot down, but the pilots of both were picked up by screening ships. The *Phelps* rescued one of them, Lt. (j.g.) Richard Crommelin.

### ***The scout bombers (SBD's.)***

The *Yorktown* had launched eight SBD's of Scouting Squadron FIVE at 0730, on orders from Admiral Fitch, to form an antitorpedo plane patrol. Captain Buckmaster termed the use of these planes as "expedient", pointing out that there were not sufficient fighters on hand to do the job. The SBD's were on station at a low altitude close to our formation. They attempted to intercept the enemy torpedo planes as they glided in at high speed, but could not catch them. The SBD's were then attacked by a superior number of Japanese fighters, and four of our planes were shot down almost immediately. In the melee, however, our planes shot down four enemy fighters and damaged several others, four of which were listed as probables. Not one of these eight SBD's escaped damage. Captain Buckmaster described their action as "a splendid example of courage and devotion to duty; although outnumbered, and opposed by faster and more maneuverable aircraft, they were not outfought"

The *Lexington* also had eight scouts out as an antitorpedo plane patrol, on station at 2,000 feet at a distance of some 6,000 yards from their carrier. The enemy planes came in over them. The SBD's, however, managed to score impressively. Captain Sherman credited them with shooting down eight enemy torpedo planes, four of them before they could launch their torpedoes; one dive bomber and one fighter. One *Lexington* SBD was shot down. Another, piloted by Lt. (j.g.) Frank R. McDonald, fell over the side while attempting to land. Lieutenant McDonald was wounded in the shoulder. He and his rear seat man, C. H. Hamilton, aviation radioman, third class, were rescued by the *Morris*.

A *Lexington* fighter pilot said later that the SBD's that day were like "a small boy sent to do a man's job."

### ATTACK ON THE *YORKTOWN*

The *Yorktown* went to general quarters at 0545. After the launching of the air striking group, and aside from launchings and recoveries of planes on combat patrol, the morning passed uneventfully until the actual time of the enemy attack. Fighter directing was done for both our carriers by the *Lexington*, and *Yorktown* planes conformed to orders issued by that ship.

At 1055 radar picked up a large group of enemy planes bearing 020°, distance 68 miles. At 1111, when these planes were 15 miles distant, the fleet course was changed to 125°. Enemy torpedo planes came in over and through our protecting fighters and scouts and fire was opened at 1118 by the bearing 5-inch batteries. The enemy torpedo planes separated into small groups almost immediately after fire was opened. Three dropped torpedoes from the port quarter, followed closely by four on the port beam. When the first three torpedoes hit the water Captain Buckmaster applied full right rudder and rang for emergency flank speed. At this point the *Yorktown* and *Lexington* began drawing apart.

The ship was steadied on a course parallel to the torpedoes dropped on the port beam sufficiently long to allow them to run past the port side close aboard.

The fire from our ships, meanwhile, had knocked down four planes from the group which had dropped three torpedoes on the port quarter. The tracks of these three torpedoes were not observed close to the *Yorktown*. Of the group of torpedo planes which approached on the port beam, one was shot down before and one after dropping.

A third group of planes rounded the *Yorktown*'s stern about 8,000 yards or more out and dropped on the starboard quarter. The *Yorktown* turned to present her stern. Two tracks were observed running past on the starboard side. This group of planes launched well out, and only one was brought down.

A single torpedo plane approached parallel to the starboard side to a point forward of the beam. This plane was under continuous 5-inch and 1.1 fire. It turned toward the *Yorktown* but dropped at a distance of 2,000 yards in the face of the fire from all guns on that side. The ship was swung to the right as this torpedo dropped, and it passed across the bow.

Fifteen to eighteen enemy dive bombers began an attack at 1124, coming out of the sun and generally diving across the deck from port to starboard. The bridge or island structure appeared to be their point

of aim. All planes were held under heavy fire, and course was changed, generally under the dives or toward the direction from which they started. One bomb hit was received. There were six near misses on the starboard side, two very close, between the bow and the bridge; at least two very near misses on the port quarter, and two or three on the starboard quarter. These lifted the screws clear of the water. One of the near misses on the starboard bow touched the edge of the catwalk just abaft the No. 3 5-inch gun.

Fragments from another miss in the same vicinity pierced the hull in several places above the water line.

During the latter stages of the dive-bombing attack several reports were received on the bridge of torpedo planes attacking on both quarters and astern. It was believed, however, that these reports were made on planes rendezvousing after dropping.

The one direct hit struck the flight deck about 23 feet forward of No.2 elevator and about 15 feet from the island structure. Recovered fragments indicated that it was a projectile of about 12 inches in diameter. It pierced the flight deck, making a hole 14 inches in diameter, passed through No.3 ready room, the hangar deck and the second deck, angling toward the starboard side. It then hit a beam and stanchion and angled back to port, piercing the third deck. It exploded in the aviation store room about 3 feet above the fourth deck, killing 37 men outright and injuring others. On the whole, however, the damage was not great.<sup>8</sup> The ship's speed did not drop below 24 knots. Main control, when asked by the bridge if he should be slowed, replied:

“Hell, no. We’ll make it!”

The *Yorktown*'s CXAM (radar) went out of commission at 1131 but began functioning again at 1222. The next day the radar antenna was blown off its base by the wind, and it was learned that the rivets holding the antenna yoke to its pedestal had been sheared during the action of the 8th.

The YE homing transmitter also was out for a time because of damage to the antenna. As a result, there was a period of several hours following the enemy's attack and after the loss of communications in the *Lexington* when no YE homing means was available to either air group.

### **EXPERIENCES OF SHIPS WITH THE *YORKTOWN***

The action of the 8th, as viewed by the commanding officers of the cruisers and destroyers which stayed with the *Yorktown* after our carriers separated, is presented herewith:

*Astoria*--(Flagship of Rear Admiral Smith).

Captain Scanland said that Japanese torpedo planes were first seen at 1112 off the port beam of his ship, deploying for attack. The *Astoria* opened fire with her 5-inch and automatic guns, placing a barrage over and beyond the *Yorktown*. One torpedo plane was downed on the port quarter by a direct 5-inch hit. Another torpedo plane which was withdrawing off the port quarter was shot down at a range of 400 yards. A third torpedo plane, taken under fire off the port bow, was forced to drop its weapon

---

<sup>8</sup> For additional details, see appendix, p. 48.



at a height of about 500 feet. This torpedo ran ahead of the *Astoria*, causing a destroyer in its path to maneuver radically. A fourth enemy plane was observed to crash in flames 300 yards off the port bow after an apparent attempt to crash into the cruiser.

At 1120, after a brief lull, the *Astoria* commenced firing on enemy dive bombers. The ship was straddled by four bombers at 1132, but was not damaged. One dive bomber was shot down on the port bow.

Fire was ceased at 1132.

Captain Scanland estimated that a total of 6 enemy planes participated in the attack, being composed of 30 torpedo planes, 26 dive bombers, and 12 fighters.

Of the torpedo planes, he reported, 14 aimed at the *Yorktown*, 15 at the *Lexington*, and 1 at the *Astoria*. The *Yorktown*, he added, also was the target for 12 of the dive bombers, while an equal number struck at the *Lexington*. The other two dive bombers aimed at the *Astoria*.

The only casualties aboard the *Astoria* were one slight flash burn and two cases of broken toes caused by dropping 5-inch shells.

Admiral Smith also expressed satisfaction with the personnel performance of the *Astoria*, as well as that of the two other ships of his command, the *Portland* and *Chester*. The Admiral, however, was disappointed with the antiaircraft gunfire. The performance of the 5-inch batteries, he said, was “uniformly poor,” with “much wild shooting.” The 1.1’s and 20-mm. guns, “although extremely wild, were more effective.”

### ***Portland.***

From the *Portland*’s standpoint, the action began at 1117, when the *Yorktown* turned sharply to starboard. This turn brought the cruiser’s starboard batteries to bear on incoming torpedo planes. The planes were taken under fire by two 5-inch guns, two 1.1 mounts and the starboard after 20-mm. guns. Fire was continued until the range was fouled by the *Yorktown*.

Captain Perlman stated that all fire, except in the instance of one torpedo plane which was shot down approaching the *Yorktown*, was “generally without damaging effect, inasmuch as lead-offs were too small and planes were out of effective range. However, the volume of fire was apparently disconcerting to the pilots, who released torpedoes against the *Yorktown* considerably earlier than they did against the *Lexington*.”

Captain Perlman described three “phases” of the action. The second began about 1120 and consisted of a coordinated enemy torpedo plane and dive-bomber attack on the *Yorktown*. The *Portland* fired on these planes with all bearing guns without any effect other than a possible element of disturbance. The third phase consisted of uncoordinated attacks by single dive bombers from several directions. During this phase two planes diving either at the *Portland* or the *Yorktown* were observed to turn away when engaged by one 1.1 mount and four 20-mm. guns. Both planes departed smoking. Two other planes, retiring on a course opposite to that of the cruiser at an altitude of 4,000 feet, were fired on by one 5-inch battery but escaped.

Toward the end of the engagement, one enemy plane made a low level approach on the *Portland*'s port bow. At this time the *Russell* was almost directly ahead of the cruiser at a distance of 1,500 yards. Both ships opened fire and the plane fell into the sea near the destroyer.

The ship suffered no personnel casualties.

### ***Chester.***

The *Chester* opened fire on torpedo planes attacking the *Yorktown* at 1113, and continued firing as targets presented themselves until 1133. Captain Shock reported that at 1117 two torpedo planes attacked his ship from the starboard side. One was shot down before releasing its torpedo and the other after dropping, crashing just forward of the starboard beam. The torpedo passed 50-75 yards astern of the *Chester*. A third torpedo plane passed ahead of the *Chester* on its way to the *Yorktown*, and was shot down under 1.1 and 20-mm. fire from the cruiser.

Captain Shock's estimate of the total number of enemy planes and their objectives was as follows:

<i>Number</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Objective</i>
31	Torpedo type 97.	2 waves of 6 and 1 of 5 on <i>Lexington</i> . 2 waves of 6 on <i>Yorktown</i> . 2 planes on <i>Chester</i> .
20 (plus)	Dive bomber type 99 and some fighter bombers similar to Army type 97.	3 attacks of 4 or 5 planes on <i>Yorktown</i> and the remainder on <i>Lexington</i> .
15-20	Fighters type 96 or 97.	Supported attack and attempted strafing.

One marine gunner was rather seriously wounded by the premature explosion of a 20-mm. shell in a hot gun.

### ***Hammann.***

The *Hammann* first sighted enemy aircraft, identified as torpedo planes, at 1116, coming in to attack from the northeast. A minute later 2 torpedo planes approaching the *Yorktown* were taken under fire and 1 crashed in flames ahead of the carrier. Within the next few minutes enemy torpedo planes and dive bombers were fired on as they came within range. One and possibly 2 torpedo planes fell to the *Hammann*'s 5-inch and 20-mm. guns. About 10 torpedo planes and dive bombers were fired on, but most of them were at extreme ranges.

At 1130, after a brief lull, a smaller wave of enemy planes came in from the east. Fire was opened but no hits were observed. Guns were also trained on two torpedo planes, but one was brought down by the *Russell* before the *Hammann*'s guns could open.

Commander True, the ship's captain, estimated that 30 or 40 percent of the 5-inch shells fired failed to explode.

### ***Russell.***

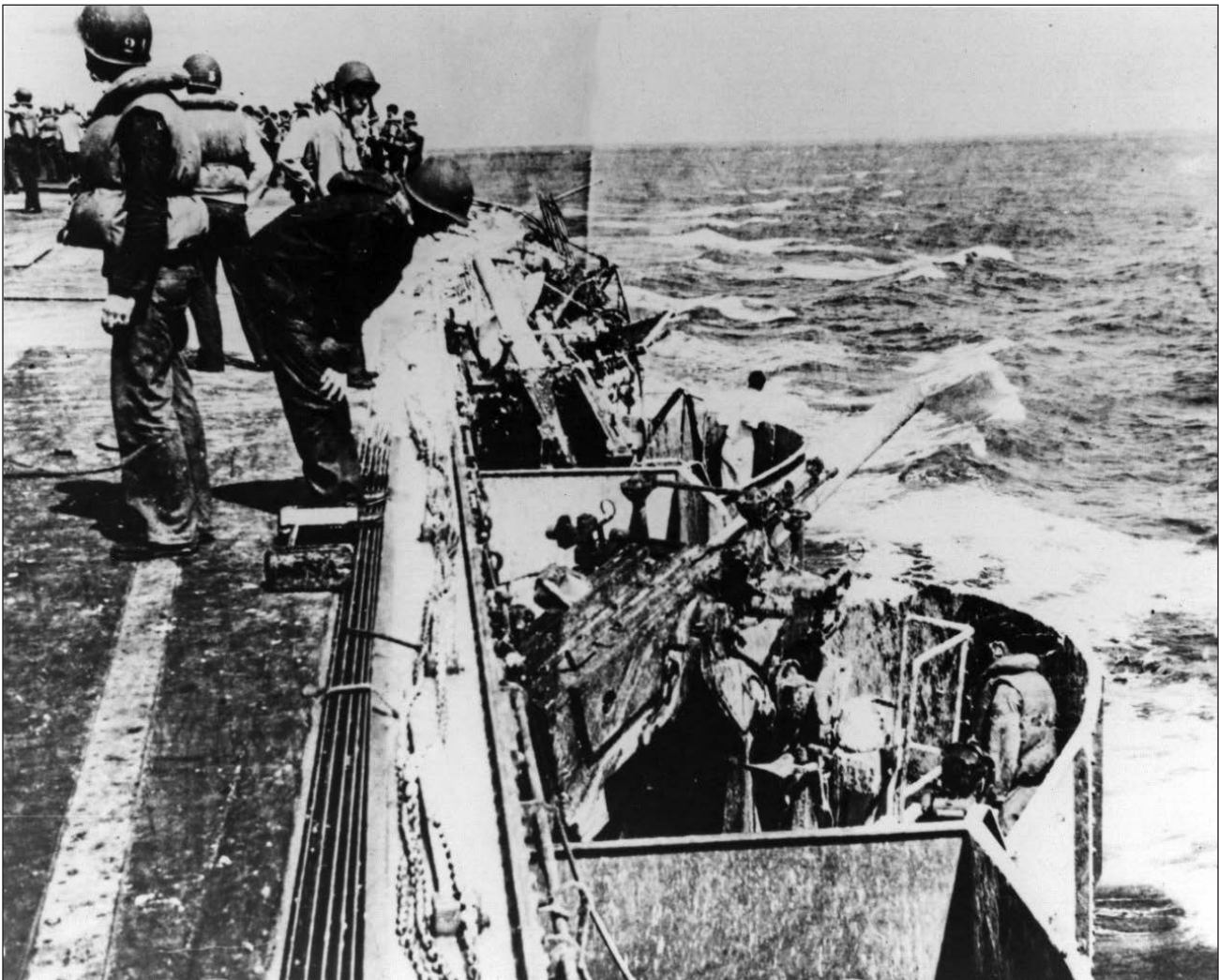
Lt. Comdr. Hartwig, commanding the *Russell*, reported that because more than one of the screening ships

frequently were firing at the same enemy plane it was difficult to determine the effect of his own guns.

“Reports of eyewitnesses vary widely,” he stated. “These reports claim four planes shot down and one disappearing, leaving a trail of smoke. There is authoritative agreement on two of those reported shot down.” One was a torpedo plane which had not dropped. The other, of a type not specified, was hit directly by a 5-inch shell and plunged into the sea despite the failure of the shell to explode.

*Aylwin.*

The only available word concerning the part played by the *Aylwin* in defending the carriers against the air attack on the 8th is a part of the battle report of Captain Early, commander Destroyer Squadron ONE, which at that time included the *Phelps* and *Dewey* in addition to the *Aylwin*. When the carriers separated the *Aylwin* remained with the *Yorktown* while Captain Early in the *Phelps* kept station on the *Lexington*. Consequently the *Aylwin* is mentioned only briefly.



*Aftermath of a hit on the Lexington's port forward gun gallery.*

## ATTACK ON THE *LEXINGTON*

The enemy aircraft attack on the *Lexington* was almost simultaneous with that on the *Yorktown*. The *Lexington* opened fire about 1113. Torpedo planes made the first attack, some approaching directly from port and others circling to come in on the starboard bow. Most of the torpedo planes approached in a high-speed glide at an angle of about 40°, dropping at an altitude of 300-500 feet. The range at the dropping point varied between 500 and 1,200 yards.

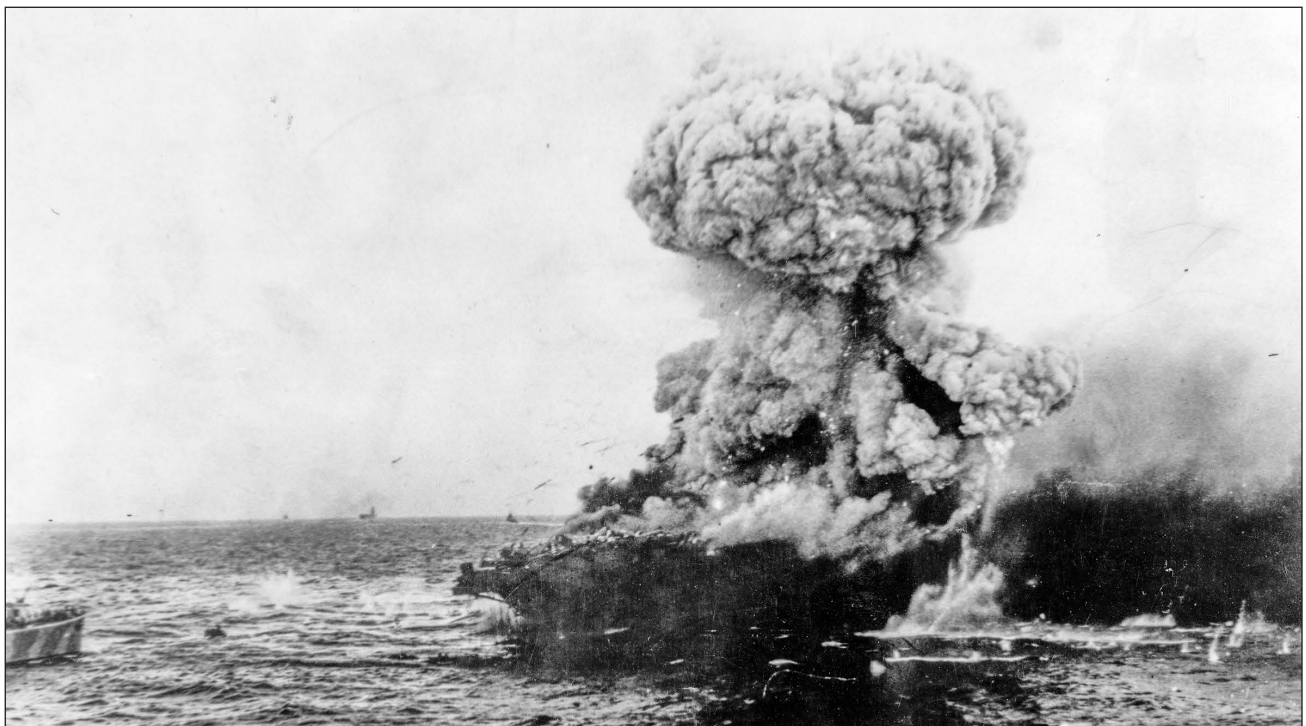
Captain Sherman ordered full left rudder to bring the first torpedoes ahead. “From then on,” he reported, “torpedoes were coming from both starboard and port and I maneuvered with full rudder both ways as I considered best to avoid torpedoes.”

Some torpedoes were observed passing from starboard ahead of the *Lexington*. Two others ran parallel to the ship, one on either side. Still others passed from port ahead, and two were believed to have run directly beneath the keel.

At 1120 the first torpedo hit, exploding just forward of the port forward gun gallery. At 1121 a second torpedo hit a little further aft, about opposite the bridge.

Four torpedo planes were shot down by the *Lexington*'s antiaircraft guns.

In the meantime dive bombers, coordinating their attacks closely with the low-flying torpedo planes, also were coming in. About the same time the first torpedo hit was received, a bomb estimated to weigh 1,000 pounds hit the after end of the port forward gun gallery. The explosion rendered the battery useless, killing the entire crew of gun No. 6, and killing or wounding 13 men on guns No. 2 and 4. Several men also were killed inboard in the main passageway on the main deck, and it is probable



*A tremendous explosion rocks the Lexington as a small boat stands by under her stern to pick up Captain Sherman.*



that some of the preset 5-inch ammunition in the ready locker off the gallery exploded and added to the destruction. Fire broke out on the gun gallery, in the admiral's cabin and surrounding country.

Another bomb of possibly 500 pounds hit the gig boat pocket on the port side, killing many men. A third and considerably smaller bomb hit and exploded inside the stack.

Two large caliber bombs which hit near the port side aft tore holes in the hull and were mistaken for torpedoes for a time. Flying fragments from one or more near hits aft on the starboard side killed and injured several machine gunners in sky aft and the after signal station.

Besides the fire in the admiral's country, there were blazes near the gig boat pocket, beneath the incinerator and in the forward starboard marine compartment near the forward elevator. The ship was listing about 6° to port. Damage control reported they were shifting oil to correct the list. Main control reported all units in commission. Nos. 2, 4, and 6 fire rooms were partially flooded, but the water was being controlled by the pumps. Both elevators were jammed in the up position due to machinery casualties in the wells, probably as a result of shock. Otherwise, the *Lexington* was making 25 knots under good control.

At about 1240 damage control reported that the ship was on an even keel, that three fires were out, and that the other one, in the admiral's country, was under control. The fact that the *Lexington* was a doomed ship was anything but apparent. Several returning pilots of the attack group, knowing she had been attacked by Jap planes, thought, before landing aboard, that she had come through unscathed.

### **EXPERIENCES OF SHIPS WITH THE *LEXINGTON***

***Minneapolis.*** - (Flagship of Rear Admiral Kinkaid).

The *Minneapolis*, Captain Lowry commanding, was directly in line with the approach of enemy torpedo planes on the *Lexington*. These planes were sighted at a distance of about 15 miles, and fire was opened at 1116. The planes passed ahead, astern and over the cruiser and were heavily engaged by the 5-inch and automatic weapons.

One torpedo plane crashed off the starboard bow of the *Minneapolis* after a direct 5-inch hit. The 1.1's and 20-mm guns destroyed another which was passing over the stern. A third was shot down by a 20-mm gun as it approached the stern.

Two planes launched torpedoes toward the cruiser, and these were seen to pass close aboard.

Dive bombers attacked the *Lexington* immediately after the torpedo planes. Captain Lowry estimated that they were about nine in number. Each was tracked and fired on by the 5-inch guns as it dived, but with no effect other than a possible deterring one.

Fire was ceased at 1133.

Difficulty in distinguishing enemy planes from our own SBD's was stressed by Captain Lowry. On several occasions our planes were fired on by the *Minneapolis* and others of the screening ships, he said.

There were no personnel casualties.

### ***New Orleans.***

The *New Orleans* reported no enemy aircraft shot down, although fire was opened on torpedo planes attacking the *Lexington* at 1114 and was kept up almost continuously against both torpedo planes and dive bombers until 1134. This failure to hit evidently was caused by the extreme range at which most of the firing was done. The commanding officer, Captain Good, recommended that with a circle spacing of 1,000 yards, as was in effect in the Coral Sea engagement, the cruisers should be placed on circle 2 instead of 3.

“The *New Orleans* was generally ahead of the carrier during this engagement,” Captain Good wrote. “Although in approximate position just prior to the attack, due to the carrier slowing down to launch planes with inadequate notice and then turning to avoid torpedoes without signal shortly after the attack, this vessel found herself approximately 4,300 yards away from the carrier at the time the dive bombers commenced their attack. This was too far away to render effective assistance with antiaircraft fire.” He also stated that the 5-inch guns were “entirely too slow in train and elevation to effectively keep on fast moving dive bombers or gliding torpedo planes,” and that “the need for remote control of 1.1- and 20-mm. mounts is more apparent than ever.

The only casualty aboard the *New Orleans* occurred among the crew of 1.1-mount on the fantail which was continuously wet from spray and occasional green seas. At one point, this gun was completely submerged, and the crew narrowly escaped being washed overboard. One man received a broken nose.

In spite of the overzealousness of topside personnel “to try to see and evaluate everything at once instead of concentrating on a particular sector or duty,” Captain Good reported that the conduct of his officers and crew under fire was “excellent.”

### ***Phelps.***

The report of the *Phelps*' commanding officer, Lt. Comdr. Beck, is not available. However, Captain Early, commander Destroyer Squadron ONE, of which she was the leader, placed her with the *Lexington* after the separation of our carriers, in a position on the carrier's starboard bow at 1129.

The attacking planes came in over the *Phelps* at 1115. Captain Early stated that fighters or dive bombers composed the first wave and that torpedo planes followed very closely. At 1118 an enemy plane crashed off the *Phelps*' port beam, burning fiercely. What appeared to be a torpedo passed beneath the *Phelps* at 1129 and a bomb struck the water close to her port beam a minute later. The attack ceased at this time.

### ***Dewey.***

The *Dewey*, according to her captain, Lt. Comdr. Chillingworth, was stationed 1,500 yards abeam of the *Lexington* when the attack commenced. He asserted that planes passed over and around the *Dewey*, three of which were shot down. Two, described as Zero fighters, were credited to 20-mm. guns, and the third, a torpedo plane, fell to 5-inch fire. From the *Phelps*, Captain Early saw two planes shot down by

the *Dewey* at 1116, 2 minutes after Lt. Comdr. Chillingworth reported opening fire.

Six men on the *Dewey* were wounded by strafing, which was done by torpedo planes approaching from port.

Several small bombs fell near the ship.

At 1430 the *Dewey* commenced an unsuccessful search astern for survivors of the air action.

### ***Morris.***

The *Morris*, commanded by Commander Jarrett, was the leader of Destroyer Squadron TWO, under Captain Hoover. Change of course as the attack began placed the *Morris* on the *Lexington's* port quarter.

According to Commander Jarrett, the first enemy torpedo plane dropped a torpedo on the carrier's port beam at 1115, dropping at the close range of 300 or 400 yards and scoring a hit. "No ship seemed to realize that enemy planes were so near until just prior to release of torpedo," he stated, "at which time firing commenced from all directions at this plane." The surprise was not due to unpreparedness but to confusion in plane identification, he pointed out, our carriers just having launched several planes which were still in the ships' vicinity.

His ship, as well as others of the screen, violated doctrine by firing on the plane after it had released its torpedo, Commander Jarrett reported.

About 20 planes in all appeared to attack the *Lexington's* formation. Commander Jarrett observed that the sun and one medium sized cloud were so aligned from his position that enemy planes "could approach high in the sun and then be blanketed from line of sight by this one cloud to make their attack without being seen until they were beginning their dive."

The *Morris* fired at an unspecified number of planes, claiming hits on two. It was stated, however, that while both planes were shot down other ships also were firing at them at the same time as the *Morris* and that consequently it was impossible to say to whose guns they fell. The action ceased at 1132.

One plane strafed the *Morris* briefly after dropping a torpedo at the *Lexington*, but there were no casualties. Commander Jarrett characterized the behavior of personnel as excellent.

Captain Hoover also remarked the slowness with which our ships opened fire on the attacking planes, likewise crediting this to confusion over aircraft identification. He described our antiaircraft fire as a whole as "relatively ineffective," that of the 5-inch guns being "erratic and uncoordinated," and that of the 1.1's and 20-mm.'s as "frequently being directed at targets beyond range.

### ***Anderson.***

According to Lt. Comdr. Ginder, commanding officer of the *Anderson*, Japanese planes dived out of a cloud on the *Lexington* at 1116. At 1116½, the *Anderson* opened fire on a plane on her port beam flying parallel. Although no hits were observed, the plane turned away from the carrier without dropping its torpedo.

At 1117 20-mm. fire was opened on three torpedo planes flying close to the water in the opposite

direction from the *Anderson*. No hits were observed. A minute later a plane was seen on the port bow launching a torpedo at the destroyer or a nearby cruiser, and hard left rudder was applied. The torpedo's wake crossed the bow close aboard.

Four single torpedo planes were fired on without visible effect within the next couple of minutes. In most cases the range was extreme.

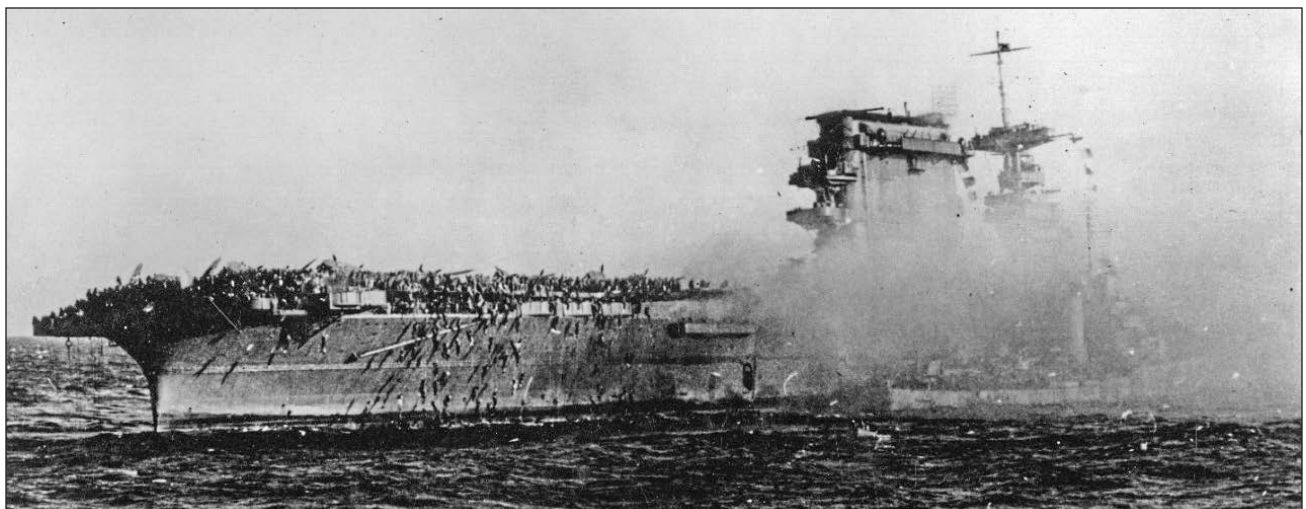
Four or five dive bombers were observed attacking the *Lexington* at 1122. Most of them came in from the side opposite that occupied by the *Anderson*, and her fire was frequently fouled by other ships. Although no hits on planes were claimed, fire control was said to have functioned smoothly.

### SINKING OF THE *LEXINGTON*

Before the attack on our ships a message was sent to the Commander Southwest Pacific Forces at 1000, giving the enemy's position and disposition at 0900, in the hope that shore-based aircraft would be able to bomb and track them. Army bombers of the Australian command were active from the 2d through the 12th, reconnoitering and bombing enemy bases in the area, but weather conditions prevented their locating the Japanese carriers.

When all planes of our attack groups had either returned or been given up for lost, Admiral Fletcher made a quick estimate of the situation. Consideration was given to making another air attack or sending the attack group in for a surface engagement. There was reason to believe that one Japanese carrier had escaped damage, and at 1422 Admiral Fitch reported that there were indications that an additional carrier had joined the enemy forces. Damage had reduced the *Yorktown's* maximum speed to 30 knots and the *Lexington's* to 24. Furthermore, both our carriers had lost a great number of planes in action and others had been rendered unserviceable by damage. This last consideration caused Admiral Fletcher to abandon the idea of another air attack. The idea of a surface attack also was rejected because it was felt that our ships might be subject to a strong carrier air attack before dark.

The decision was to retire to the southward for further investigation of damage to ships and to give the air groups time to put sufficient planes in service for a strong attack the following day.



*Abandoning the Lexington over her starboard quarter.*



The sudden breakdown of the *Lexington* prevented the planned transfer of her operable planes to the *Yorktown*. When she lost headway the planes on deck could not take off, and 35 of them went down with her. However, 16 planes, 4 fighters, and 10 SBD's were saved. These were in the air when the *Lexington* came to a stop, and were landed aboard the *Yorktown* about 1535.

A combat patrol was maintained until darkness fell.

Admiral Fletcher reassumed tactical command at 1510. Conditions aboard the *Lexington*, meanwhile, had been growing worse. It was planned to take her serviceable planes aboard the *Yorktown* and send her back to Pearl Harbor for repairs. Of course she never got there, but the decision to retire was responsible for the saving of a large number of *Lexington* personnel. "Although probably based on incorrect information," Admiral Fletcher stated, "(the decision) resulted in saving the lives of 92 percent of *Lexington's* personnel, a large portion of which would have been lost if the attack group had not been present when the ship sank."

As Task Force FOX proceeded southward, Comdr. Morton T. Seligman, executive officer of the *Lexington*, made an inspection of the ship. He found the damage control parties functioning smoothly, and "there was no apparent cause for concern." After reassuring himself as to the fires, Commander Seligman was making his way to the sick bay when a "terrific" explosion below decks blew him through a hatch scuttle. This occurred at 1247, and was followed by severe fires in the C.P.O. passageway and at other points on the second deck, being especially bad near the gunnery office.

Where the explosion occurred or what caused it was not immediately known. Some thought it was caused by a "sleeper" bomb. Eventually it was concluded that small gasoline leaks resulting from the heavy pounding the *Lexington* had absorbed caused an accumulation of vapors in the bowels of the ship, where they were set off by sparks of unknown origin. "In any event," Captain Sherman related, "from this time on the ship was doomed."

Hoses from the after section of the fire main were led out and strenuous efforts were made to combat the fires, which were spreading aft. As the fires gained headway, frequent additional minor explosions occurred below decks, either from hot 5-inch ammunition or gasoline vapors. The fires gradually ate through more and more communications. All lights forward went out. The fire main pressure dropped to 30 or 40 pounds. The telephone circuit to the trick wheel went dead and Captain Sherman steered for a while with the engines. Smoke filled spaces below decks. Commander Seligman concluded that the original explosion had occurred below the armored deck and that subsequent blasts and fires were incidental.

At 1452 the task force commander was informed that the fires were not under control, and at 1456 the *Lexington* signalled for help.

Heat, smoke, and gas conditions were such that men not equipped with rescue breathers could not participate in fighting the fires. The ship's allowance of these breathers was soon exhausted, but many men, equipped only with regular gas masks, which were inadequate, persisted in going back into the dangerous areas.

Excerpts from Commander Seligman's report of succeeding developments give a vivid picture of the scene. He wrote:

"Lt Comdr. Edward J. O'Donnell, the gunnery officer, had procured two additional hoses from aft. These were led into the scuttles of the 5-inch ammunition hoist to starboard, and the last available hose was led into the dumb waiter of the food distribution room in an attempt to flood the C.P.O. country. Good pressure was maintained on these hoses for a short time and it was hoped that sufficient water could be gotten below to flood the area on fire forward of the quarter deck and check the spread of the blaze. Under existing conditions it was impossible to combat it otherwise.

"Lt (j.g.) Raymond O. Deitzer, who was in charge of the gasoline system, had determined shortly after the completion of the attack that the system on the starboard side was functioning satisfactorily. The gas system on the port side had been secured just subsequent to the attack as a precautionary measure. Well before the terrific blast at 1247 he had ordered that the gas control room on the port side be flooded with water and smothered with CO<sub>2</sub>.

"It appeared that the situation, while extremely grave, might not be hopeless if sufficient water could be obtained.

"I proceeded to the flight deck, considerably weakened by smoke. Shortly afterward another explosion occurred. The forward elevator was jammed up and sheets of flame could be seen below it. A hose from aft was obtained and seemed to have some effect.

"I asked Carpenter Nowak to insure that all hangar deck sprinklers were on, and Lt. Comdr. O'Donnell saw that the 'ready' torpedo warheads on the mezzanine were sprinkled.

"It soon became necessary to evacuate the hangar deck aft and many wounded were brought from the fuselage deck to the topside. Lt. (j.g.) John F. Roach (MC) and Lt. Morris A. Hirsch led rescue personnel in evacuating all these wounded with utter disregard for their own safety.

"The forward part of the ship was ablaze, both above and below the armored deck with absolutely no means left to fight the fire, which was now spreading aft on the flight deck. It was inevitable that the 20-odd torpedo warheads on the mezzanine of the hangar deck must eventually detonate.

"One sound power phone to main control still was functioning, but communication was not good and it appeared that the heat might ground it out at any moment. Accordingly I sent word to the chief engineer that it might become necessary to abandon ship, and ordered that the life rafts be placed in the nettings and unoccupied personnel distributed forward and aft on the starboard side, as the ship was listing about 7° to port.

"I then proceeded to the bridge and reported the situation to the commanding officer. (He) immediately ordered that the engineering department be secured and personnel evacuated to the flight deck.

"I must again comment on the heroism of personnel. It was an inspiration. The first thought of all was for the wounded."

The engineering plant was secured at 1630, and the *Lexington* soon lay dead in the water.

“I ordered life rafts made ready and preparations made to abandon ship,” Captain Sherman related. “Fire fighting efforts were still being made until the engineering plant was abandoned, when all water pressure was gone. At this time I asked Admiral Fitch for destroyers to come alongside and pass over fire hoses, thinking we might control the fire if we got water. The Admiral directed DD’s to come



*Lexington* personnel climb up ropes to safety on a cruiser.

alongside and also directed me to disembark excess personnel to the destroyers. The *Morris* passed two hoses over, which were put to work, and excess personnel went down lines to her deck. However, by this time the fire was beyond control. Additional explosions were occurring; it was reported that the warheads on the hangar deck had been at a temperature of 1400 F.; ready bomb storage was in the vicinity of the fire and I considered there was danger of the ship blowing up at any minute.”

At 1707 Admiral Fitch directed Captain Sherman to abandon ship. Thereupon Admiral Kinkaid was directed to take charge of rescue operations. The *Anderson* and *Hammann* joined the *Morris* alongside the *Lexington*, while the *Minneapolis* and *New Orleans* stood by.

The *Morris* secured the hoses that had been passed to the carrier at 1714 and made preparations to move clear. All available deck space was crowded with survivors, and several hundred men were in the water between the destroyer and the *Lexington*. There also were many life rafts in the vicinity and a motor whaleboat from the *Minneapolis* with about 40 survivors aboard. The *Morris* backed her propellers several times, and when her stern was clear began backing away. A section of her bridge wind screen was carried away, a searchlight was damaged, and a foremast stay was snapped as she eased away from the carrier.

At 1737 the *Morris* went alongside the *Minneapolis* and transferred about 200 survivors to the cruiser. The *Morris* then relieved a ship screening the *Yorktown*.

While the *Morris* was alongside the *Lexington* the *Anderson* and *Hammann* were circling the stricken carrier clockwise. At 1657 the *Anderson* proceeded to the *Lexington*'s port side but experienced difficulty, largely because of the carrier's pronounced list to port, in making fast. Unable to stay alongside, the *Anderson* moved ahead to pick up survivors from the water. Before moving off she launched two small boats. These were filled with personnel from the water, who subsequently were taken aboard the *Dewey*. The *Anderson* proceeded to join the *Yorktown* and transferred to the carrier 17 rescued officers and 360 men.

At 1536 the *Hammann* was ordered to relieve the *Phelps* in standing by the *Lexington*, and soon afterward took station on the carrier's port quarter. Many men were taken aboard after lowering themselves down ropes and nets. Others were picked up by two small boats, a whaleboat and gig, which towed life rafts to the *Minneapolis*.

At 1720 Admiral Kinkaid directed the *Hammann* to move around to the *Lexington*'s starboard to pick up many men still in the water. The *Lexington* was in the trough of the sea, drifting at one or two knots with the wind, and the men in the water on her leeward side were having difficulty getting clear. The *Hammann* moved carefully in among the many men in the water, and only by skillful maneuvering was able to come alongside without crushing men between herself and the carrier. About 100 men were taken from the water and life rafts on the leeward side. As the *Hammann* backed clear at 1750 a heavy explosion within the *Lexington* showered the destroyer with flaming debris, but no one was injured.

Debris fouled both the *Hammann*'s main circulating pumps, causing a loss of backing power, so instead of transferring those rescued to the *New Orleans* as she had been directed to do, the destroyer circled



back to recover her small boats at 1845. Ensign Theodore E. Krepski and Ensign Ralph L. Holton, who were in charge of the *Hammann* boats, were recommended for award for their excellent performance during the rescue work.

At 1739 both the *Phelps* and *Dewey* were ordered to close the *Lexington* and assist in the rescue. They took station 1,000 yards to windward and launched small boats to pick up survivors. Neither went alongside the carrier, as it was obvious by this time that most if not all hands had left the ship.

At 1810, after it was quite dark, Lt. Comdr. John C. Daniel, in a *Phelps* whaleboat, made a hazardous turn around the *Lexington* and along her lee side to make certain no more people were in the water there. The carrier had just been rocked by a particularly heavy explosion which tossed planes from her deck high into the air, was afire from stem to stern and listing about 30°. No more survivors were found.

Captain Sherman and Commander Seligman made a final inspection before leaving the ship. They found several men manning a gun mount on the starboard side aft who would not abandon ship until ordered to do so.

Sometime after 1800 the *Executive*, followed by the captain, slid down a line over the stern. A small boat took them to the *Minneapolis*.

More than 92 percent of the *Lexington*'s crew were saved. It was believed that not a man was lost by drowning during the abandonment. A preliminary check accounted for all but 26 officers and 190 men of a total complement of 2,951.

To list the names of all officers and men who performed tasks above and beyond the call of duty would fill several pages, and would not be complete at that. In the words of Commander Seligman, "All of the individual cases of heroism and devotion to duty will probably never be revealed." Suffice it to say that there were many.

Admiral Fletcher particularly commended Admiral Kinkaid's direction of the rescue work.

At 1853 the *Phelps* was detailed to sink the *Lexington*. Five torpedoes, four of which detonated, were fired between 1915 and 1952. The *Lexington* sank very suddenly at 1952 in 2,400 fathoms of water. The position was latitude 15°12' S., longitude 155°27' E.

A few seconds after the *Lexington* disappeared two terrific explosions occurred underwater. The shock was distinctly felt by ships of the main body, which by this time were 10 miles away. The captain of the *Phelps* thought momentarily that he had been torpedoed.

*Summary of Enemy Damage.*<sup>9</sup>

Ships sunk:	Date
1 carrier - <i>Shoho</i>	May 7
1 light cruiser	May 7
2 destroyers	May 4
1 cargo ship or transport	May 4
4 gunboats	May 4

---

9

Ships damaged:	Date
1 carrier - <i>Shokaku</i>	May 8
1 aircraft tender	May 4

---

2

Aircraft destroyed:	Date
33 fighters	May 7 and 8
3 four-engined patrol bombers	May 5, 7, and 8
5 floatplanes	May 4
16 dive bombers	May 7 and 8
17 torpedo planes	May 7 and 8
30 planes aboard <i>Shoho</i>	

---

104

*Summary of our losses.*

Ships sunk:	Date
1 carrier - <i>Lexington</i>	May 8
1 oiler - <i>Neosho</i>	May 7
1 destroyer - <i>Sims</i>	May 7

---

3

Ships damaged:	Date
1 carrier - <i>Yorktown</i>	May 8

---

1

---

<sup>9</sup> Compiled from information subsequently received by O. N. I.

Aircraft destroyed:

15 <i>Lexington</i> planes in combat	May 7 and 8
35 <i>Lexington</i> planes with ship	May 8
16 <i>Yorktown</i> planes in combat	May 4, 7, and 8

---

66

Our personnel losses were estimated at 543; the enemy's at anywhere from 2,000 to more than 5,000.

### CONCLUSIONS

CINCPAC considered that Admiral Fletcher “utilized with consummate skill the information supplied him, and by these engagements in the Coral Sea between the 4th and the 8th of May won a victory with decisive and far-reaching consequences for the Allied cause.”

He also remarked on “the splendid spirit and resolution of officers and men that contributed so markedly to the succession of smashing victories.”

The fogging of bomb sights in dives from altitudes of 17,000 feet or more was the “outstanding material defect of the 3-day action,” Admiral Nimitz declared.

Other “lessons” learned from the Coral Sea action, as listed by CINCPAC, were these:

Training of both aviation and gunnery personnel must be expanded. Insufficient fighter planes prevented adequate protection of either our attack groups or ships of the task force.

Obsolescent torpedo planes hampered the pilots of these squadrons. Torpedo plane attacks are more effective, as proved by the Coral Sea battle, when coordinated with dive-bombing attacks.

Automatic weapons must have new directors and lead computers in order to shoot down attacking planes before they release their missiles.

All carriers should have two long-range radars.

Operations of land-based aircraft and fleet units must be better co-ordinated by intensive combined training.

Aircraft bombs and torpedoes must be made more effective.

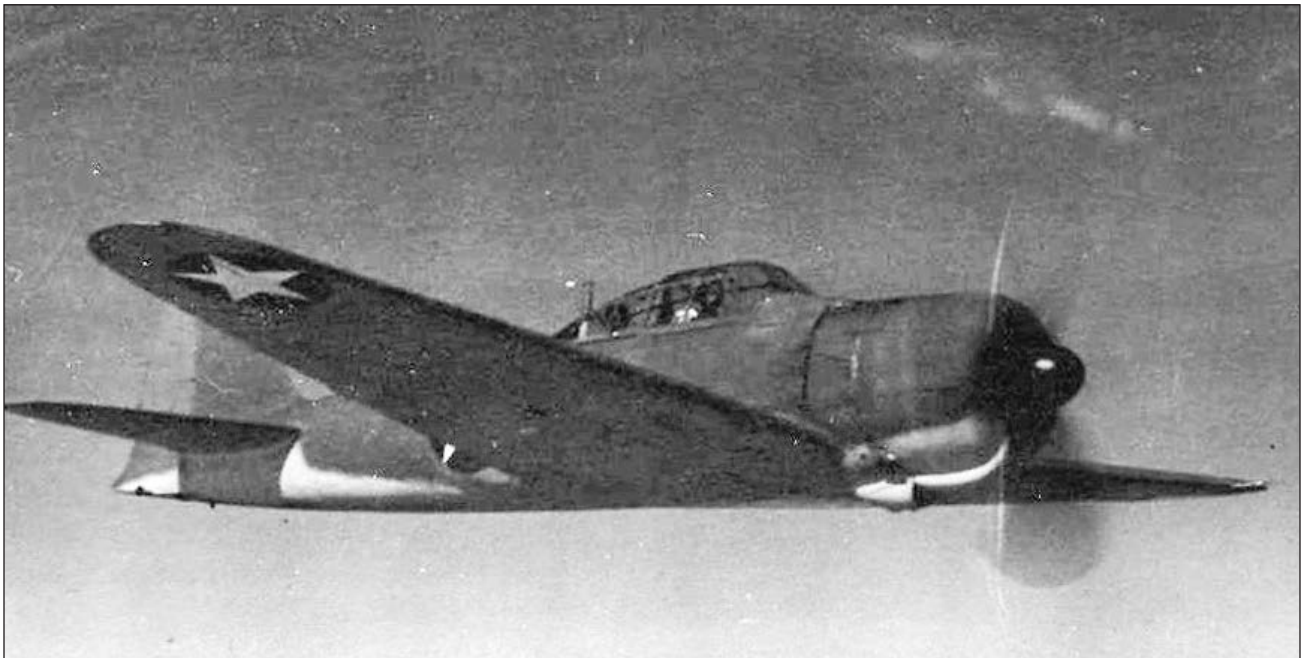
Means must be provided for reducing the menace to carriers inherent in the carrying of large quantities of gasoline.

Screening ships provide best protection for carriers against torpedo planes when stationed on a 1,500- to 2,500-yard circle.





*In the Coral Sea, the Lexington and Yorktown were equipped with this (F4F-3) version of the Grumman "Wildcat" fighter. At that time the red center circle of our star insignia and red and white horizontal tail stripes had not been eliminated. The rugged F4F-3 was outflown but not outfought by the "Zero," having superior armament and carrying both armor and self-sealing gas tanks.*



*This is the Japanese Mitsubishi "Zero" fighter, which began appearing in Pacific combat zones about the time of the Coral Sea battle. It was a highly maneuverable craft, but limited in fire power and without armor or self-sealing fuel tanks. Out pilots found them worthy opponents. The one pictured here was captured in the Aleutians, which accounts for the United States insignia.*

## APPENDIX

### RESCUE OF *YORKTOWN* PILOTS FROM GUADALCANAL

At 1640 on May 4th the destroyer *Hammann*, Commander True commanding, was detached from Task Force FOX to search for the pilots of two *Yorktown* fighter planes which had force-landed on Guadalcanal Island. The planes were reported to have come down at a point near Cape Henslow, which was about 42 miles distant from the task force at the time of the *Hammann's* detachment. The order specified that the destroyer search no longer than would enable her to rendezvous with the combination of forces at daylight the following morning, at latitude 15°00' S., longitude 160°00' E.

Proceeding at 30 knots, the *Hammann* reached a point about 6,000 yards off the coast of the island. For a while intermittent rain squalls and a heavy overcast obscured vision, but at length a white marker (parachute) and the two planes were sighted on the beach about 2 miles east of the cape. A short rain squall obscured the beach for a time after this first sighting, but by 1820 a motor whaleboat, with a crew of five in charge of Ensign Robert P. F. Enright, had been launched. The small boat reached a point about 150 yards off shore from the planes, where heavy surf and the steepness of the beach made further progress inadvisable.

The two pilots, Lt. (j.g.) Elbert S. McCuskey, and Ensign John P. Adams, sought to paddle out to the whaleboat in rubber life rafts taken from their planes, but were thrown back by the surf. Coxswain G. W. Kapp then swam through the breakers with a line and all three men were pulled out to the whaleboat. Ensign Enright had been ordered to destroy the planes and tried unsuccessfully to do so with small arms fire. Before being pulled out to the boat the pilots had destroyed all confidential gear and papers but had been unable to fire the planes. When shooting from the boat proved ineffectual, Lieutenant McCuskey took a Very pistol and swam in with a line for another try. While swimming ashore he became fouled in the line, freed himself only after great exertion, and collapsed upon reaching the beach. Darkness had fallen by this time and the people in the boat did not know, until they fired a flare which revealed him on the beach, whether or not he had made it.

A further complication developed because the depth of the water beneath the whaleboat precluded satisfactory anchoring. Position had been kept by running the engine, but when Lieutenant McCuskey discarded his line the slack fouled the whaleboat's propeller and the small craft started drifting into the surf. While other members of the crew paddled, Boatswain's Mate A. S. Jason dived overboard and succeeded in clearing the propeller with knife and hacksaw. Kapp then attempted to carry a line ashore but failed. Jason again went overboard. He reached shore with a line and both he and McCuskey were hauled back to the whaleboat. Before leaving they made additional efforts to destroy the planes without success, and finally gave up in view of the need for haste. The whaleboat returned to the destroyer at 2118, and the *Hammann* was able to rejoin the task force at the appointed rendezvous.

## LOSS OF THE *NEOSHO* AND *SIMS*.

Upon being detached from Task Force FOX on May 6th, the *Neosho*, with *Sims* as escort, proceeded southward in accordance with fueling arrangements. The ships had reached a position at latitude 16°01' S., longitude 158°01' E. by about 0800 of the 7th, when planes began to be contacted both by radar and visually. For a time it was thought possible that the planes were ours. However, at 0929 the *Sims*, then moving ahead of the *Neosho* as antisubmarine screen, was attacked by a single reconnaissance type plane which dropped one bomb about 100 yards off the destroyer's starboard quarter. According to *Sims* survivors, the plane, which came over at an altitude of about 15,000 feet, was not seen before the bomb fell.

Both our ships at this point sounded general quarters and built up speed to 18 knots. After one or more false alarms occasioned by radar contacts, 15 aircraft were clearly sighted bearing 025° true from the *Neosho* at a high altitude. They flew past on the port side and then disappeared to the northeastward without making any attempt to attack. The *Sims* fired on the aircraft without visible effect. A few minutes later 7 more planes were observed approaching from 010° true. These likewise flew parallel to our ships for a time but made no attacks. Both the *Neosho* and *Sims* fired on them as they passed to port.

At 1033 still another group of planes, 10 in number, approached from 140° true. Three of them, all twin-engined bombers, made a horizontal run on the *Neosho*, dropping three bombs from a high altitude. All fell to starboard, two within 25 yards. Both ships fired on the attacking planes, but apparently no hits were made and the enemy flew off to the northeastward.

Planes continued to show on the radar screen, but no more appeared until 1201, when approximately 24 enemy dive bombers were sighted at a considerable altitude, apparently maneuvering into position to attack. The *Sims* thereupon moved back to take up position on the *Neosho*'s port quarter. Both our ships were attacked heavily during the ensuing 15 or more minutes. The enemy planes dived from all directions and the sequence of events was lost in the confusion and destruction which followed.

Only 13 enlisted men survived of the *Sims*' entire complement. Although their stories conflicted, it was apparent that the destroyer took at least 3 direct hits from bombs estimated to weigh 500 pounds. As near as can be determined, 4 enemy planes dove extremely low on the *Sims*. People aboard the *Neosho* said afterward that none of the 4 survived their dives, being either shot down or destroyed by the blast of their own missiles. Nevertheless, bombs exploded in both the forward and after engine rooms and wrecked the *Sims*. All power was lost and the ship stopped. Her topside was a shambles. The *Sims*' commanding officer, Lt. Comdr. Willford M. Hyman, immediately turned the men who had survived the bomb explosions to assisting the repair party to throw overboard all weight possible. While this effort to keep the ship afloat was being made, one motor whaleboat and two life rafts were launched. The whaleboat was ordered to go aft and try to extinguish a fire in the after deck house and flood the after magazine. As the small boat moved around the bow the *Sims* seemed to break amidships. She went down slowly, stern first. All hands began leaping into the water and swimming clear, but

as the water reached the top of the stack a terrific explosion occurred and the water was immediately covered with oil. A moment later another smaller explosion took place. Surviving fireroom men did not believe either explosion could have been the boilers, since all pressure had been lost. The consensus was that the depth charges or warheads had gone off. Whatever the case, the blasts contributed greatly to the loss of life. Lt. Comdr. Hyman was last seen on the bridge giving orders in an attempt to save his ship.

The one *Sims* whaleboat which had been launched reached the *Neosho* at about 1445, and 15 men were taken aboard the tanker, 2 of whom later died. Chief Signalman R. J. Dickens, who was in charge of the whale-boat, said that he had picked up all survivors he had seen where the destroyer went down.

While the *Sims* was under attack the *Neosho* also was having severe difficulties. The greater number of the enemy bombers concentrated on her. It was an unequal struggle from the beginning, and although the *Neosho's* 20-mm gunners stuck to their weapons manfully, shooting down three planes and damaging others so that they were forced to pull out of their dives prematurely, the oiler received seven direct hits and at least eight near misses. The hits, as near as could be determined, were in the following sequence:

Port side main deck at the transverse bulkhead separating No. 7 and No. 8 port wing tanks.

Starboard stack deck near No. 3 gun enclosure, penetrating to the after center bunker tank before exploding.

Forward of the stacks on the center line at frame 30, piercing to the fireroom before exploding.

In the bridge structure on the port side, penetrating the main deck and exploding in No. 5 port wing tank.

On the starboard side of the main deck abaft the bridge structure, exploding in No. 6 starboard wing tank.

On the main deck, starboard side, forward of the bridge structure, penetrating the transverse bulkhead separating No.3 and No.4 starboard wing tanks.

On the starboard side of the main deck, penetrating into No. 8 starboard wing tank.

Further damage was done to the *Neosho* by one of the three enemy bombers which was shot down. This plane, although in flames, made a suicide landing on deck, crashing into the No. 4 gun enclosure. The gun was damaged and intense fires broke out at once and spread aft over the stack deck. This occurred about 1214.

Soon after the last bomb fell, the *Neosho's* commanding officer, Comdr. John S. Phillips, ordered all hands to prepare to abandon ship but not to do so until the word was passed. Lt. Comdr. Francis J. Firth, executive officer, although knocked unconscious and badly burned by the explosion of the plane which crashed on deck, recovered sufficiently to relay the order, and later reported to Commander Phillips for further duty. But unfortunately all hands did not conduct themselves in such a manner.

The crash of the enemy plane aboard, coming hard upon the terrific damage wrought by the bomb hits and coupled with the sudden sinking before their eyes of the *Sims*, seemed to unnerve some of the *Neosho's* crew. Several of the men on the after deck began leaping into the sea without orders. Furthermore, seven undamaged life rafts were set adrift. Sadly enough, a junior officer gave directions concerning this abandonment although he had received no orders from the bridge.

About 1230, Commander Phillips detailed two motor whaleboats to pick up personnel who had leaped overboard and to tow back the drifting life rafts. The whaleboats returned overloaded with men taken from the water. They had not been able, thus crowded, to take any rafts in tow, and by the time they had put the men back aboard the *Neosho* it was considered too near sunset to send them out again. Not only was darkness coming on, but the sea was making up, the wind having increased gradually to a force of 5-6 as the day wore on. Distress calls had been sent to Task Force FOX, and it was hoped that ships sent to the rescue would be able to find the rafts the next day.

Meanwhile, although fires had been brought under control, the *Neosho* was obviously a doomed ship. Despite pumping, water continued to rise within her, and her main deck was buckling gradually in a manner which threatened her with breaking in two at any moment.

A muster upon return to ship of the whaleboats showed 16 officers and 94 men accounted for; 1 officer and 19 men known dead, and 4 officers and 154 missing, besides the 15 men from the *Sims*. Many were wounded and several later died.

In spite of all the damage she had absorbed the *Neosho* remained afloat. During the night of the 7th three whaleboats, one of them from the *Sims*, were kept in the water near the port side to pick up survivors in case the *Neosho* capsized. All classified material was ordered destroyed in order to prevent its falling into enemy hands. Thereafter all radio transmission had to be sent in plain language. Sending was possible because of an auxiliary transmitter.

On the morning of the 8th an effort was made to determine the *Neosho's* position. The ship had developed a 26° list to starboard, that edge of the main deck being under water. It was impossible to raise steam. All movable gear on the starboard side was thrown overboard in an attempt to correct the list. After an unsuccessful attempt to break the starboard anchor chain, it was let go with a run, but the bitter end held. The *Neosho* was drifting 280° all the time at an estimated speed of 1.4 knots. The list to starboard had been reduced by only about 3°.

By 1012 on the 9th the *Neosho's* position was taken as latitude 15°35' S., longitude 156°55' E. The men continued making floats and rafts of all available gear, and rigged masts, spars and sails for all available boats. The three motor whaleboats were still in the water alongside, but by this time the motor of only one was operable, and this one had the others in tow.

The morning of the 10th dawned with no help in sight, but at 1230 a plane appeared to the south and as it came closer was identified as an Australian Hudson bomber. The *Neosho* flashed her name and hoisted the international distress signal. The plane, meanwhile, had asked if the ship was in distress, and upon receiving an affirmative answer circled several times and flew off to the southward. The *Neosho* also gave her position but received no reply.



Nothing further of note occurred until the 11th. By this time it was apparent that the *Neosho* had settled appreciably during the night, and the distortion of her plates also had increased alarmingly. At about 1130 a final conference of the officers was held regarding abandoning ship and the best course to the Australian coast. However, about this time a Navy PBY flying boat from the *Tangier* appeared from the east, circled twice and moved off to the south. Within an hour and a half a destroyer, later identified as the U.S.S. *Henley*, was sighted approaching from the south. The *Henley* hove to on the *Neosho*'s port side and by 1412 had removed all survivors.

When all hands were aboard the *Henley*, Commander Phillips, explaining that his ship was a total loss, asked that she be sunk. The *Henley* complied, firing two torpedoes and several rounds of 5-inch. The *Neosho* went down, stern first, at 1522. The position was latitude 15°35' S., longitude 155°36' E.

The *Henley* searched the area until dark for the men who had abandoned ship, without results. She then headed for Brisbane, Australia, in order to take the wounded to hospitals as soon as possible. While underway at 0100 on the 12th, however, she received orders to return to the scene of the *Neosho*'s bombing and make a wider search. Again the effort was fruitless, and she proceeded to Brisbane.

In the meantime, Commander Phillips discovered that his navigation officer had improperly plotted the position of the *Neosho* at the time of the attack, and that the error had led to a search being made from an improper position. Therefore on the 14th another destroyer, the U.S.S. *Helm*, was dispatched (both the *Henley* and the *Helm* were sent out from Noumea, New Caledonia) to make a search for survivors on the basis of the corrected attack position.

On the 16th the *Helm* sighted an empty *Neosho* whaleboat, and on the 17th, at latitude 15°16' S., longitude 155°07'30" E., 4 *Neosho* survivors were picked up from a life raft. All were in a critical condition from exposure, and 1 man died soon after being taken aboard. The other 3 reported that they had abandoned the *Neosho* at 1155 on the 7th, leaving the ship in one of 4 rafts lashed together and carrying 68 men in all. Their story was one of exhausted water and food because neither was rationed; of men becoming crazed and leaping into the sea or perishing on the rafts. Of the original 68, only 4 were alive after 8 days.

The *Helm* searched until sunset of the 17th, and then proceeded to Brisbane, arriving on the 19th. *Tangier* planes maintained a search without success until the 22d.

## ENEMY AIRCRAFT ATTACK ON THE SUPPORT FORCE, MAY 7TH.

After being detached from the main body of Task Force FOX, the support force, under command of Admiral Crace, proceeded to Jomard Passage at a speed of 25 knots. Ships present were the heavy cruisers H. M. A. S. *Australia* (flag) and U. S. S. *Chicago*, the light cruiser H. M. A. S. *Hobart*, and the U. S. destroyers *Perkins*, *Farragut*, and *Walke*. At about 0840 radar indicated that the formation was being shadowed by three planes. One of these aircraft, a twin-float monoplane, was sighted by the *Chicago*, but it stayed well out of gun range. No other planes were sighted until 1427, when a formation of 10 or 12 single-engine monoplanes with retractable landing gear approached the ships from astern on a parallel course to port. At this time the support force was in latitude 12°00' S., longitude 151°31' E., in formation "Victor". The planes passed within about 6,000 yards of the *Farragut*, which was on station bearing approximately 300° from the guide ship, the *Australia*. Several ships opened fire briefly but no hits were made, and the planes passed rapidly ahead and out of sight.

At 1505 more enemy planes, which had been detected by radar, approached the formation from dead ahead. Estimates of their numbers varied between 10 and 14; descriptions best fitted the Mitsubishi type 97 heavy bomber. They were twin-engine aircraft armed with torpedoes. Few people agreed as to just what happened during the ensuing crowded minutes. Our ships were deployed thus:

	<i>Perkins</i>		
	X		
<i>Farragut</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Walke</i>	
X	X	X	
<i>Hobart</i>	<i>Chicago</i>		
X	X		

Fire was opened by the leading ships in the formation at a range of about 6,500 yards, and as nearly as can be determined two enemy planes, including the formation leader, were shot down almost immediately, whereupon the planes broke their tight V formation and came on in smaller groups from both port and starboard of the *Perkins*. The tactics of but nine enemy planes are described in available reports. Only five torpedo tracks were observed, and of these two were seen passing by the *Australia* and three by the *Chicago*. Whatever the truth of the matter, the ships maneuvered radically, put up a heavy curtain of fire, and avoided all torpedoes. After dropping, the planes strafed ships in the path of their retirement. The *Chicago* had seven men wounded topside, two of whom later died. While this was going on most of the ships' guns that would bear continued firing, and at least two more enemy planes were shot down. Many gunners claimed hits. The *Chicago* said that five enemy aircraft had been shot down; the *Perkins*' estimate was four to six. Within 10 minutes of their appearance the surviving enemy planes were out of sight to the north.

While the torpedo attack was in progress additional enemy planes had been picked up by radar, and very shortly afterward our force was again under attack. This was a level bombing attack from an altitude variously estimated from 14,000 to 24,000 feet. Approaching from directly astern, the bombers, described as the Mitsubishi type 96, apparently selected the *Australia* as their target. A salvo



of bombs 500 yards in diameter straddled the *Australia*, but no hits were made and two misses which shook the cruiser slightly caused no damage. Some time later two planes were observed shadowing our formation, but no further action occurred.

Several minutes after this high-level attack, a V of three more bombers passed over and dropped a salvo of bombs from a high altitude. According to Admiral Crace, these three planes subsequently were identified by means of photographs as United States Army B-26 bombers. He said their bombs fell close to an unspecified destroyer seven cables from the *Australia*.

The *Walke's* commanding officer, Lt. Comdr. Fraser, also remarked on this incident of the support force being attacked by friendly planes. He described them as four-engined Flying Fortresses, however, and reported that their bombs fell just astern of the *Farragut*.

## **RESULTS OF A DIRECT HIT ON THE *YORKTOWN*, MAY 8TH.**

The bomb which struck the *Yorktown's* flight deck penetrated a vertical distance of 50 feet from the point of impact to the point of detonation, piercing a total thickness of 1.68 inches of steel deck plating.

The hole in the flight deck was clean. The holes in the hangar and second decks were jagged and somewhat larger. The ship's shell was not punctured. The flight and galley decks were not harmed, but the hangar deck was bulged across its entire breadth from frame No.100 to frame No. 115.

A hole 4 feet in diameter was blown up through the second deck 8 feet inboard of the bomb impact hole, and the entire deck in the marine living compartment was bulged upward. Also, the transverse bulkheads of this compartment were badly bulged forward and aft. However, they did not rupture, and all doors remained secure, though severely warped.

When the bomb hit the second deck it pierced the general lighting and battle light and power circuits for the damaged area, causing short circuits. Several people in the fire parties were shocked, one seriously.

A hole 6 feet in diameter was blown out of the third deck, with the deck turned and peeled back over an area of 35 square feet. The entire deck in compartment C-301-1L was bulged upward, and the ship's service store and office, soda fountain, engineer's office, and laundry issue room were wrecked.

The fourth deck was not ruptured but was dished downward over an area of 40 square feet. The inboard bulkhead of the forward engine room access truck, and the after bulkhead of the laundry storeroom were shattered. Two watertight doors were severely damaged and a large hatch cover was thrown about 15 feet up into the No. 2 elevator pit. The transverse bulkheads and doors joining four compartments were blown out.

Minor fires broke out in the aviation storeroom, and the flash of the explosion passed up to the hangar overhead, causing a small paint fire directly above the bomb impact hole. A minor fire also broke out in the marine living compartment.

The explosion was responsible for 37 of the 40 deaths aboard the *Yorktown* and for many of the 26 serious injuries.

Hoses attached to fireplugs in the hangar were led to the bomb hole and No. 2 elevator pit and used to extinguish the fires on the three decks below. By chance, a shorted power circuit in the aviation storeroom started the sprinkling system, and this aided the fire parties materially. The fire and repair parties performed excellently. Noteworthy was the action of Lt. Milton E. Ricketts, officer in charge of repair No. 5. His men all killed, wounded, or stunned by the bomb blast immediately below his station, and himself mortally wounded, Lieutenant Ricketts opened the valve of a fireplug, partially led out the hose and directed a stream of water into the fire before dropping dead. This was the first hose put on the fire.

Only two near misses caused perceptible damage, and this was restricted to piercings of the hull above the water line.

### Designations of U.S. Naval Aircraft

<b>Model</b>	<b>Class</b>	<b>Manufacturer</b>	<b>U.S. name</b>	<b>British name</b>
BD	Bomber	Douglas	--	Boston III Havoc
F2A	Fighter	Brewster	Buffalo	Buffalo
F3A	-do-	-do-	--	
F4F	-do-	Grumman	Wildcat	Marlett, II, IV
F6F	-do-	-do-	Wildcat II	
F7F	-do-	-do-	--	
FG	-do-	Goodyear	Corsair	
FM	-do-	Eastern Aircraft	Wildcat	
F4U	-do-	Vought-Sikorsky	Corsair	
GB	Transport	Beech	--	
GH	-do-	Howard	--	
GK	-do-	Fairchild	--	
HE	Ambulance	Piper	--	
J2F	Utility	Grumman	--	
J4F	-do-	-do-	--	
JRB	Utility, multi-engine	Beech	--	
JRF	-do-	Grumman	--	Goose I
JRK	-do-	Nash-Kelvinator	--	
JR2S	-do-	Vought-Sikorsky	--	
NE	Trainer, primary	Piper	--	
NH	Trainer, advanced	Howard	--	
NP	Trainer, primary	Spartan	--	
NR	-do-	Ryan	--	
N2S	-do-	Stearman (Boeing)	--	
N3N	-do-	Naval Aircraft Factory	--	
OS2N	Observation scout	-do-	Kingfisher	
OS2U	-do-	Vought-Sikorsky	-do-	
PBB	Patrol bomber, 2-engine, boat	Boeing	Sea Ranger	
PBM	-do-	Martin	Mariner	
PBN	-do-	Naval Aircraft Factory	--	
PBO	Patrol bomber, 2-engine, landplane.	Lockheed	--	Hudson III
PBY	Patrol bomber, 2-engine, boat.	Consolidated	Catalina	Catalina
P4Y	-do-	-do-	--	
PB2M	Patrol bomber, 4-engine, boat.	Martin	Mars	
PB2Y	-do-	Consolidated	Coronado	

PB4Y	Patrol bomber, 4-engine, landplane.	-do-	--	Liberator
PV	Patrol bomber, 4-engine, landplane.	Vega	--	Ventura
R3C	Transport, multi-engine	Curtiss	--	
R3D, R4D, and R5D	-do-	Douglas	--	
R5O	-do-	Lockheed	--	Lodestar
SB2A	Scout bomber	Brewster	Buccaneer	Bermuda
SBC	-do-	Curtiss	Helldiver	Cleveland
SB2C	-do-	-do-	-do-	
SBD	-do-	Douglas	Dauntless	
SB2D	-do-	-do-	--	
SBN	-do-	Naval Aircraft Factory	--	
SB2U	-do-	Vought-Sikorsky	Vindicator	Chesapeake
SNB	Trainer, advanced	Beech	--	
SNC	-do-	Curtiss	--	
SNJ	-do-	North American	--	Harvard, I, II
SNV	-do-	Vultee	--	
SO3C	Scout observation	Curtiss	Seagull	Seamew
SOR	-do-	Ryan	--	
TBD	Torpedo bomber	Douglas	Devastator	
TBF	-do-	Grumman	Avenger	Tarpon
TBM	-do-	Eastern aircraft	--	
TBV	-do-	Vultee	--	

## Symbols of U.S. Navy Ships

AB	Crane ship.	CB	Large cruiser.
ACV	Auxiliary aircraft carrier.	CL	Light cruiser.
AD	Destroyer tender.	CM	Mine layer.
AE	Ammunition ship.	CMc	Coastal mine layer.
AF	Store ship.	CV	Aircraft carrier.
AG	Miscellaneous auxiliary.		
AGC	General communication vessel.	DD	Destroyer.
AGS	Surveying ship.	DE	Destroyer escort vessel.
AH	Hospital ship.	DM	Light mine layer (high speed).
AK	Cargo ship.	DMS	Mine sweeper (high speed).
AKF	Refrigerated cargo ship.		
AKS	General stores issue ship.	IX	Unclassified.
AM	Large mine sweeper.		
AMb	Base mine sweeper.	LCI(L)	Landing craft, infantry (large).
AMc	Coastal mine sweeper.	LCM(2)	50-foot landing craft, mechanized, Mk. II.
AN	Net layer.	LCM(3)	50-foot landing craft, mechanized, Mk. III.
AO	Oiler.	LCP(L)	36-foot landing craft, personnel (large).
AOG	Gasoline tanker.	LCP(R)	36-foot landing craft, Personnel (with ramp).
AP	Transport.	LCR(L)	Landing craft, rubber (large).
APc	Coastal transport.	LCR(S)	Landing craft, rubber (small).
APD	Troop transport (high speed).	LCS(S)	Landing craft, support (small).
APH	Transport for wounded.	LCT(5)	Landing craft, tank, Mk. V.
APR	Rescue transport.	LCV	Landing craft, vehicle.
APS	Auxiliary cargo submarine.	LCVP	Landing craft, vehicle and personnel.
APV	Aircraft transport.	LSD	Landing ship, dock.
AR	Repair ship.	LST	Landing ship, tank.
ARD	Floating drydock.	LVT	Landing vehicle, tracked (unarmored).
ARH	Heavy hull repair ship.	LVT(A)	Landing vehicle, tracked (armored).
ARS	Salvage vessel.		
AS	Submarine tender.	PC	Submarine chaser.
ASR	Submarine rescue vessel.	PE	Eagle boat.
AT	Ocean-going tug.	PG	Gun boat.
ATR	Salvage tug.	PR	River gun boat.
AV	Seaplane tender (large).	PT	Motor torpedo boat.
AVC	Catapult lighter.	PTC	Motor boat submarine chaser.
AVD	Seaplane tender (converted DD).	PY	Yacht.
AVP	Seaplane tender (small).	PYc	Coastal yacht.
BB	Battleship.	RPC	63-foot submarine chaser (Russia).
		RPT	Motor torpedo boat (Russia).
CA	Heavy Cruiser.		

SM	Mine laying submarine.	YMS	Motor mine sweeper.
SS	Submarine.	YMT	Motor tug.
YA	Ash lighter.	YN	Net tender.
YAG	District auxiliary, miscellaneous.	YNg	Gate vessel.
YC	Open lighter.	YNT	Net tender (tug class).
YCF	Car float.	YO	Fuel oil barge.
YCK	Open cargo lighter.	YOG	Gasoline barge.
YCV	Aircraft transportation lighter.	YOS	Oil storage barge.
YD	Floating derick.	YP	District patrol boat.
YDT	Diving tender.	YPD	Floating pile driver.
YF	Covered lighter; range tender; provision store lighter.	YPK	Pontoon stowage barge.
YFB	Ferry boat and launch.	YR	Floating workshop.
YFD	Floating drydock.	YRC	Submarine rescue chamber.
YFT	Torpedo transportation lighter.	YRD	Floating pile driver.
YG	Garbage lighter.	YS	Stevedore barge.
YH	Ambulance boat.	YSD	Seaplane wrecking derrick.
YHB	Houseboat.	YSP	Salvage pontoon.
YHT	Heating scow.	YSR	Sludge removal barge.
YM	Dredge.	YT	Harbor tug.
		YTT	Torpedo testing barge.
		YW	Water barge.

**Note:** Ships carrying prefix symbol B, except BB, and ships shown above with prefix symbol R, represent vessels under construction or conversion and being financed by Lend-Lease appropriations.







**Naval History and Heritage Command**  
**U.S. Navy**

