

BATTLE FOR AUSTRALIA
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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great honour for me to deliver this address online.

Today we remember those who fought in the Battle for Australia.

Those who served and died in the defence of Australia in 1942 and 1943.

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the fall of Rabaul, the capture of Ambon, the fall of Singapore, the bombing of Darwin, the fall of Timor, the decisive defeats at sea in the Battles of the Java Sea and the Sunda Strait, the loss of the Dutch East Indies and disaster in the Philippines, the outlook for Australia in early 1942 was grim.

Japan presented a real and lethal threat.

Many believed invasion of Australia was imminent.

No. 75 Squadron (RAAF), equipped with Kittyhawks, deployed to New Guinea in March to provide air defence for the strategic city of Port Moresby.

At the end of April, after six weeks of intense air combat the remarkable Squadron Leader John Jackson and his pilots had successfully defended Port Moresby: destroying 35 enemy aircraft for the loss of 12 pilots, including Jackson and 22 Kittyhawks.

A few days later, a powerful Japanese invasion force was deployed from Rabaul to seize Port Moresby.

Alerted by signals intelligence and collaborative intelligence assessment, American and Australian forces deployed to intercept the invasion force.

From the 4th to the 8th of May 1942, the two fleets engaged.

It was the first naval battle in history in which neither fleet saw the other nor engaged in direct combat.

The battle was fought entirely with carrier borne aircraft.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was of great significance as the United States Navy, with support from ships of the Royal Australian Navy,

was able to inflict the first strategic defeat of the Pacific war on the Imperial Japanese Navy.

Importantly, the threat from the sea to Port Moresby was removed.

A month later this position was further consolidated at the Battle of Midway when two US Navy carrier battle groups destroyed all four opposing Japanese carriers and their highly capable and experienced air wing, for the loss of one carrier.

The distinguished British historian, John Keegan described Admiral Spruance's victory at Midway as the most stunning and decisive blow in the history of naval warfare.

On the 7th August 1942, American marines landed in Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and seized an airfield built by the Japanese.

The operation was well supported by a large naval force including three Australian cruisers.

With the Japanese attempting to break through the allied defences, HMAS *Canberra* was sunk at night off Savo Island on the 9th of August with great loss of life.

Fighting on land and at sea continued until March 1943, when the Japanese eventually abandoned their campaign.

On the 26th of August 1942, the Japanese began to land at Milne Bay on the south-eastern tip of Papua.

Their objective was to capture three Allied airfields which were defended by Australian soldiers and Royal Australian Air Force aircraft.

After heavy fighting and intimate close air support from two Air Force Kittyhawk Squadrons, the Japanese withdrew on the 7th of September.

This was the first decisive Allied defeat of the Japanese on land during the Second World War and was enabled by the extraordinary teamwork between the Army and the Air Force.

The Japanese also began their offensive on the Kokoda Track on 26 August 1942.

Under the inspirational leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner the 39th Battalion held their position at Isurava until relieved by the 21st Brigade who continued to hold the position for a further four days against a much larger enemy force.

From Isurava the Australian forces commenced a fighting withdrawal along the Kokoda Track to Imita Ridge. By September, the Japanese could not sustain their advance and withdrew.

In October, our forces counterattacked retaking Kokoda in early November 1942.

During the campaign, the Australians fought with great courage and endurance in very challenging tropical and mountainous conditions.

Isurava was the location of some of the most intense fighting in the Kokoda campaign.

Today, the Isurava Memorial is one of the most moving, stunning and spectacular Australian memorials – it stands high on the Kokoda Track overlooking a valley in the Owen Stanley ranges.

The memorial features four Australian black granite pillars each inscribed with a word – ‘courage’, ‘endurance’, ‘mateship’ and ‘sacrifice’.

These represent the values displayed by Australians who fought along the Kokoda Track and in the other battles in 1942 and 1943.

On the 16th of November 1942, the Allies began their offensive to clear the Japanese invasion force from Buna, Gona and San-ananda on the shores of the Solomon Sea.

Casualties on both sides were high and it wasn't until 23 January 1943 that all Japanese positions had been captured.

The six month land campaign involving Kokoda, Buna, Gona and San-ananda was very costly to Australia.

2,000 Australians were killed, 3,500 were wounded and 15,500 succumbed to infectious disease, principally malaria.

On the 2-3 March 1943 the Allied Air Forces delivered the final knock out blow to the enemy in the Battle of the Bismark Sea.

A combined force of US and Australian aircraft destroyed a large, escorted reinforcement convoy carrying 6000 troops destined from Rabaul and for Lae.

All eight troopships and four of the eight destroyer escorts were sunk and 3000 troops were killed.

General McArthur called it the most decisive aerial engagement of the war in the south-west Pacific.

Today, we honour all those who proudly served our country during the many battles that comprise the Battle for Australia.

Battles that turned the tide against the advancing Japanese and removed the threat to Australia and her vital sea lines of communication to the United States.

Had the Japanese been successful in taking Port Moresby, they would have been positioned at Australia's front door in the perfect location to mount military operations into Australia.

Things may have turned out very differently in these circumstances.

So today, the 1st of September 2021:

We remember the momentous events of 79 years ago that shaped Australia's future in our time of peril.

We remember the great courage and the commitment of our sailors, soldiers and aviators in repulsing the enemy advance.

We remember those who died, those who were wounded and those who suffered from disease.

We remember with gratitude their service and sacrifice to ensure Australia's security.

We owe them all a great debt.

Lest we forget.