

# War in the Pacific

## Defending Australia

### The First Six Months

Chapter 24

16 May 1942...

The US Navy Detects and Prepares to Defeat an Attack on Midway  
Japanese Submarines Attack Australia

# Situation report – 16 May 1942

- After 5 months of war the Japanese avalanche has swept away the Western Empires in South East Asia and the forces defending them.
- The Japanese have reached out beyond South East Asia to Hawaii and Ceylon and destroyed major units of American and British naval and air forces.
- Japanese forces have everywhere been tactically superior to the defenders, on land, sea and in the air.
- After the Allied losses the Japanese now also have numerical superiority of naval and air forces in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.
- The only remaining areas where Japanese and Allied forces are close enough to continue effective operations is on the line Timor - Darwin - Horn Island - Moresby/Lae – Rabaul - Tulagi.

# Timor – Darwin – Moresby – Tulagi

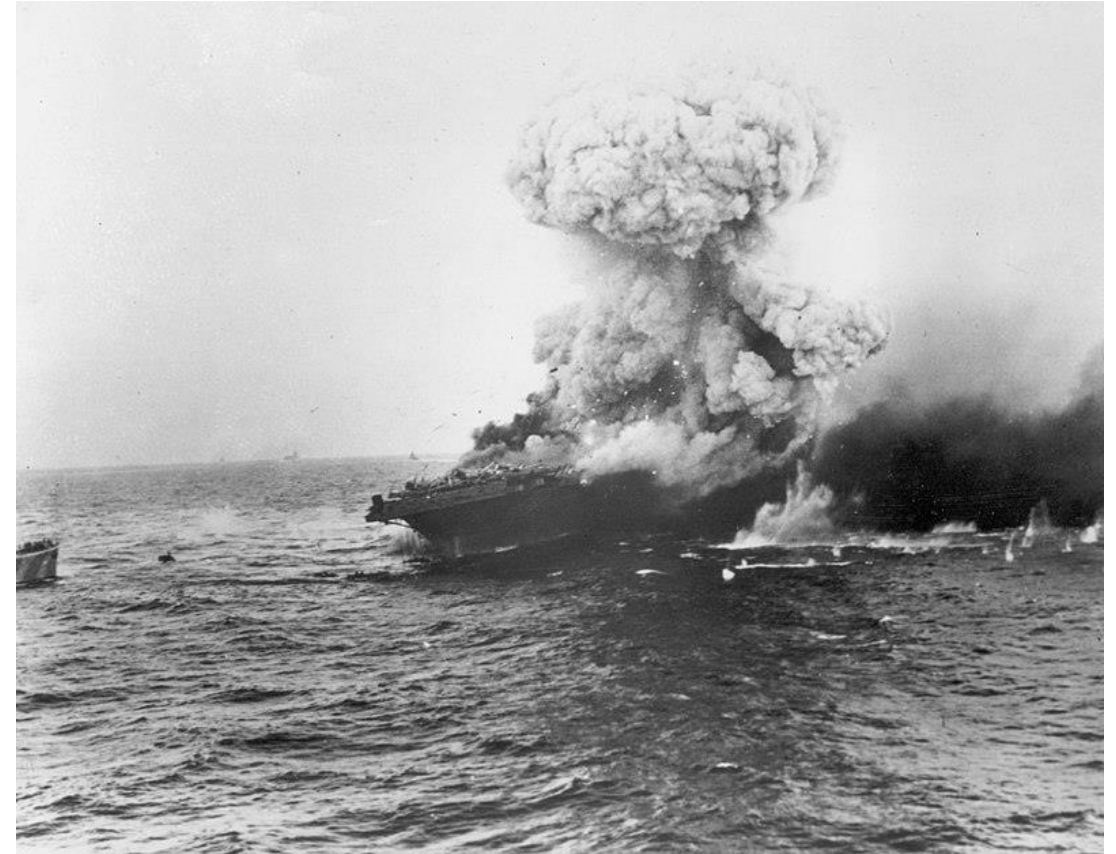


# Situation report – 16 May 1942

- Early in May a Japanese invasion fleet had left Rabaul to capture Port Moresby.
- Forewarned by decoded radio intercepts, Admirals King and Nimitz had positioned two aircraft carrier taskforces in the Coral Sea to resist this thrust.
- They had also sent two more carrier task forces southwards in case reinforcements were needed, denuding the defences of Hawaii and the West Coast of America.
- On 7 & 8 May the two fleets had fought a drawn battle in the Coral Sea.
  - The Americans sank a light carrier and damaged a fleet carrier
  - The Japanese sank the Lexington, the biggest warship in the US Navy, and damaged the Yorktown, another fleet carrier.
  - During the climax of the battle on the 8<sup>th</sup> both sides scored three hits by dive bombers but the Japanese scored two hits with torpedoes to none. It was these torpedo hits which sank the Lexington.
  - During the battle the Japanese withdrew the invasion fleet until sea control could be established.
- Following the battle there were only two serviceable American aircraft carriers in the Pacific whereas the Japanese had at least seven.

# Situation report – 16 May 1942

- Radio intercepts indicate that a large naval force is due to leave Japan on 20th May and could be at some point on the line joining Alaska, Hawaii and Australia between 1st and 5th June.
- MacArthur has advised Curtin that
  - "We have . . . in this theatre at the present time all the elements that have produced disaster in the Western Pacific since the beginning of the war."
- Halsey in Task Force 16 with the two remaining US carriers remains in the South Pacific.
- Australian Intelligence is predicting that carrier air attacks against Horn Island and Townsville are probable and against Brisbane and Sydney are possible.
- The air battle continues along the line from Timor to Tulagi with both sides seeking to capture or develop new airbases as well as attacking the enemy's bases



A mushroom cloud rises from a heavy explosion on Lexington, 8 May 1942.

# 16 May - Sea

- **South China Sea**
- On 16 May Lt Cdr “Red” Coe in Skipjack saw the wake of one of his torpedoes pass directly under a fat transport off Camranh Bay. It was the second time it had happened on that patrol.
- **Australian Coast**
- At 8.34 p.m. on the 16<sup>th</sup> (May) an intercepted radio message reported the Russian steamer Wellen (5,135 tons) being attacked by gunfire approximately 30 miles east of Newcastle.
- Merchant sailings from Sydney and Newcastle were suspended for 24 hours.
- An anti-submarine search with all available A/S craft; and air searches were carried out without finding the enemy.
- Wellen reached Newcastle at 2.30 a.m. on the 17th, having suffered slight damage. Her captain, one officer, and one rating were injured.
- The submarine had fired seven rounds at 100 yards range, and Wellen replied with low angle and machine-gun fire, whereupon the enemy submerged, the flooding of tanks being heard in Wellen.



“Red” Coe, CO, Skipjack

# 16 May - Sea

- **Central Pacific**
- CinCPac Intelligence learned that the Japanese had called off the RY Operation for the invasion of Nauru and Ocean Islands.
- At 16.00 Nimitz signalled Halsey “Desire you proceed to the Hawaiian area”
- Within the hour a detailed justification was flashed to Cominch outlining the latest evidence of the increasing enemy build up.
  - CinCPac intelligence indicated a force massing at Saipan for an operation in the mid Pacific.
  - Nimitz committed to “watch the situation closely and return Halsey to southward if imminent concentration that area.”
- General Emmons in Hawaii passes on to the War Department an extract of Pacific Fleet Intelligence Summary which indicates that
  - Japanese are preparing for an offensive against US territory about May 20<sup>th</sup>.
  - Possible points of attack include Midway, Aleutian and Hawaiian Islands.



Lieutenant General Delos C. Emmons,  
Commanding General of the Hawaiian  
Department

# 16 May

- **Land**
- He (Blamey) replied (to MacArthur), on the 16th, that he could provide the troops (to protect new airfields)
- **Air**
- **New Guinea**
- On 16 May, fourteen B25s and four B26s destroyed buildings, set fire to fuel dumps, and damaged grounded aircraft at Lae.
  - One aircraft failed to return.
- B17s attacked the seaplane base at Deboyne Island.
- **Burma**
- Heavy bombers again strike airfield at Myitkyina, pounding runways and buildings. Subsequent reconnaissance indicates that the runways are unusable.



North American B-25 Mitchell

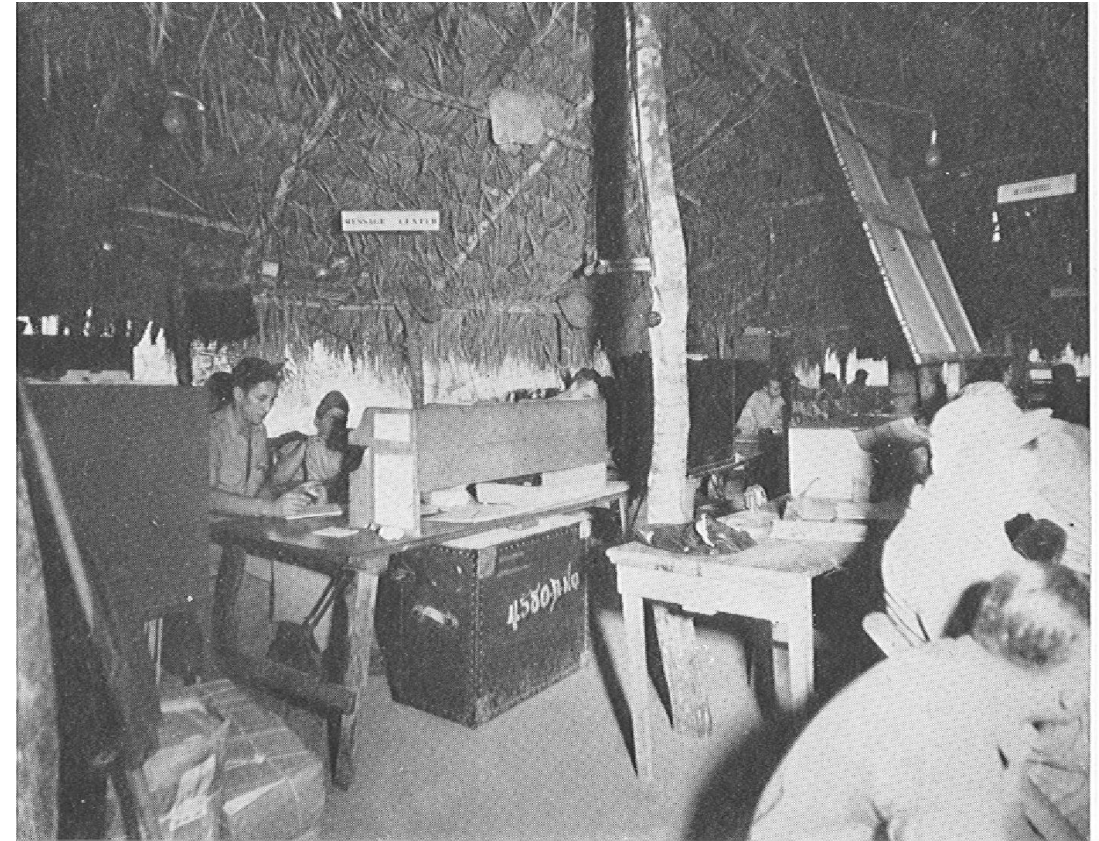


# 17 May - Sea

- **Sea**
- On (17 May) a raft with four men alive on it was found by the destroyer Helm. These were the sole survivors of 68 men on four rafts, who had abandoned ship from Neosho.
  - This high mortality was considered excessive for a raft journey of ten days in tropical seas and was attributed largely to carelessness and poor discipline.
  - But after several similar experiences the Navy improved the design and equipment of life rafts and the doctrine for their use.
- On the morning of 17th May, in the Carolines, a Japanese submarine was sighted on the surface, "numerals and men on the bridge plainly visible", by the U.S. submarine Tautog, twenty-three days out from Pearl on her way to Fremantle.
  - An American torpedo disabled the submarine, which replied with gunfire, but
  - the duel ended when Tautog registered a second hit under the enemy's conning tower.
- CinCPac arranged for the seaplane tender Tangier at Efate and the heavy cruiser Salt Lake City in Australian waters to broadcast radio traffic simulating the operations of carriers flying aircraft, to deceive Japanese intelligence that Halsey was still in the South West Pacific.
- CinCPac decided to form a North Pacific Force of two heavy cruisers, three light cruisers and ten destroyers under Admiral Theobald, to protect Alaska and the Aleutians.

# 17 May - Air

- **New Guinea**
- Nine Zeros tried to strafe 7 Mile but were intercepted by P39s.
  - One Zero was claimed damaged but
  - 2Lt Bland was hit and forced to ditch in Bootless Inlet.
- By mid May the first flights of the 35th Group, equipped with P400s, an export version of the P39 armed with a 20mm cannon instead of the 37mm cannon in the P39, arrived to relieve the pilots of the 8th Group.
  - 1Lt Scandrett scored the 35's first victory on the 17<sup>th</sup> when he downed a Zero over 7 Mile.
- **South Pacific**
- On 15<sup>th</sup> May General McArthur reports that
  - the 69<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron will depart Brisbane on the SS Cremer on May 17<sup>th</sup> for New Caledonia, and
  - the 17<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron will depart for Fiji on the same ship.
- The 68<sup>th</sup> pursuit disembarked at Tongatabu on the 17<sup>th</sup>.



HEADQUARTERS, 35TH FIGHTER GROUP, PORT MORESBY, 1942

# 18 May

- **Sea**
- On 18th May Tromp and Arunta left Sydney escorting convoy "ZK .8" of four ships—the Dutch Bantam (9,312 tons), Bontekoe (5,033 tons), Van Heemskerk (2,996 tons) and Van Heutsz (4,552 tons)—carrying 4,735 troops of the Australian 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade to reinforce Port Moresby.
- A May 18 order to a submarine unit from Jaluit was decoded.
  - “Change the directive of the movements of the AF and AO occupation forces ... The positions in which the submarines must be prior-will be 150 miles ... to the eastward of AI.”
  - CinCPac Intelligence were pretty sure that AF was Midway, AO the Aleutians and that the submarines were to picket Oahu, which they believed was AI.
  - But Navy department staff in Washington predicted that the Japanese were still heading south.
- Nimitz signalled Halsey “Expedite return”

# 18 May

- **Air**

- In the early morning of 18 May two formations of 18 and 16 bombers escorted by 15 Zeros attacked the airfields at Moresby (raid 52). The warning system gave the P39s time to get into the air and climb to intercept.
  - Three P39s intercepted the bombers attacking 7 Mile, claiming two destroyed and others damaged. They broke up the attack and the bombs fell to the north of the strip.
  - The Zeros then bounced the P39s, 2Lt Chapman being shot down and killed and 2Lt Beeson being severely wounded.
  - The second bomber formation attacked 12 Mile. Two aircraft and the runway were damaged and some fuel supplies set on fire. One bomber was claimed destroyed.
  - 35 Fighter squadron was forced to return to 7 Mile because of the damage to 12 Mile.
- Six B17s bomb shipping in Koepang Bay.
- Seventh Air Force (Central Pacific) is placed on alert in anticipation of a possible attack on Midway. For the next 10 days the old B18s are used on search to supplement the B17s.
- VII Bomber Command receives an influx of B17s during this period, and the 72nd Bomb Sq is converted from B18s to B17s.

- **Industry**

- After Firestone produced the program's first bale of synthetic rubber on April 26, 1942, Goodyear produced their first bale on May 18.

# JIC 18<sup>th</sup> May

TULAGI, (FLORIDA ISLANDS) is being used by the Japanese as a base for large patrol planes.

Japanese Navy. Continued serial reconnaissance in the Melanesian area reveals only a small number of enemy naval units remaining in that area. This indicates that the heavy units have been withdrawn, possibly for employment in some other theater in the near future. This may be for an offensive thrust against UNITED STATES Territory in the form of raids and/or attempts to occupy MIDWAY ISLAND and points in the ALIUTIANS.

Australia. A Soviet merchant ship has arrived at NEWCASTLE (southeast coast of AUSTRALIA) after being shelled by an enemy submarine on 16 May. The attack resulted in slight damage to the vessel and minor casualties to some members of the crew.

# 19 May

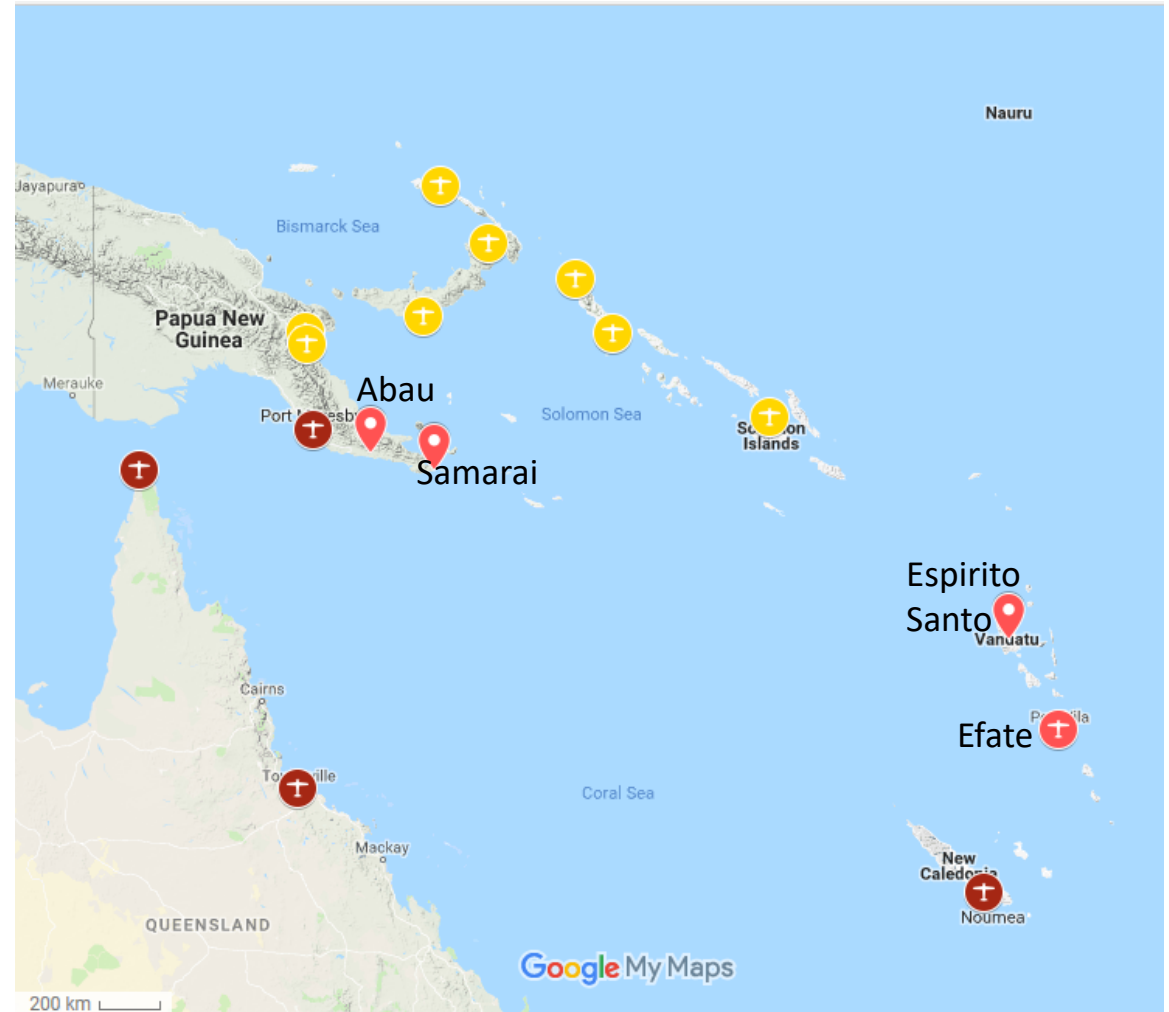
- **Sea**
- An urgent request to the British Admiralty to lend the Pacific Fleet one of their three carriers then operating in the Indian Ocean, some thousands of miles from the nearest enemy carriers, received the discouraging reply on 19 May that
- none could be spared, and that
- British Intelligence reported “no indication of an attack on Alaska or the Hawaiian Islands”.



Churchill & Admiral Pound, First Sea Lord

# 19 May

- **Land**
- On 19<sup>th</sup> May General Patch reports he proposes to occupy Espirito Santo with a force of 500 men. Reconnaissance shows that it is suitable for construction of a fighter airfield.
- **Air**
- RAAF planes raided shipping at Dilli. Results were not observed.
- The RAF raided Akyab there was fierce interception by Zeros, and one crew failed to return.



# JIC 19<sup>th</sup> May

German Ships. The heavy cruiser PRINZ EUGEN, escorted by 4 destroyers and by aircraft, was attacked late on 17 May off LISTER (southwest NORWAY) by a force of 39 or more British Coastal Command aircraft (Beaufort torpedo planes, Hudsons, Blenheims, and Beaufighters). Two certain torpedo hits and a third possible torpedo hit are claimed, but there is no evidence that the cruiser was sunk. Nine British

planes (including seven torpedo planes) and five German planes were destroyed. No further reports have been received concerning either of the pocket battleships ADMIRAL GORTL and LUTOW (Germans No. 150)



# 20 May

- **Sea**
- A long signal from the Combined Fleet flagship to all units, intercepted on 20 May, contained so many references to AF that it was clearly the operational order for a battle.
- In an attempt to obtain a definitive identification of AF, Rochefort instructed Midway, by submarine cable, to make a radio call in plain English stating that the island's water distillation plant had broken down.
- To maintain the deception 14<sup>th</sup> Naval District at Pearl signalled back that a water barge was on its way with emergency supplies.



Commander Joseph Rochefort

# 20 May - Midway

- When Nimitz had flown in on 2 May to see the Midway commanders, Lt Col Shannon, USMC, and Cdr Simard, he inspected the installations, and then directed Shannon to submit a detailed list of all supplies and equipment he would need to defend the atoll against a strong attack.
- Nimitz promised that all available items requested would be forwarded immediately, and within less than a week men and material were being embarked in Hawaii to bolster the island strength.
  - Three more 3-inch antiaircraft batteries totalling 12 guns,
  - a 37mm antiaircraft battery of eight guns, and
  - a 20mm antiaircraft battery of 18 guns were temporarily detached from the 3d Defense Battalion at Pearl Harbor; and
  - two rifle companies of the 2d Marine Raider Battalion, together with
  - a platoon of five light tanks, also were sent along to Midway.
  - For MAG-22, still flying Brewster fighters and Vought Vindicator dive bombers, there would be
  - 16 SBD-2 dive bombers and
  - seven relatively new Grumman F4F-3 fighters.
- About 20<sup>th</sup> May, Nimitz arranged "spot" promotions to captain and colonel respectively for Simard and Shannon, and described to them in a joint personal letter the steps being taken to reinforce their atoll against the anticipated attack. Japanese D-Day, the admiral predicted, would be about 28 May.
- On the day they received this letter, Simard and Shannon conferred on their final plans for defense, and that evening Colonel Shannon assembled his key subordinates and warned them of the impending enemy attack.
- Additional defensive measures and priorities of final efforts were outlined, and all recreational activities suspended.
- May 25 was set as the deadline for completion of the measures ordered.

# 20 May - Air

- **New Guinea**
- MacArthur, on the 20th, authorised the construction of an airstrip in the Abau-Mullins Harbour area.
  - At the same time he ordered that the air force bring its squadrons at Moresby up to full strength and that
  - American anti-aircraft troops be sent from Brisbane to the forward airfields at Townsville, Horn Island, Mareeba, Cooktown and Coen.
- Eleven P39s encountered a similar number of Zeros over Waigani.
  - The P39s had the altitude advantage and dove out of the sun for one good pass.
  - 1Lt Lynch quickly shot down two Zeros but only claimed probables as he didn't see them crash.
  - One P39 was shot down, the pilot bailed out and survived but was too badly wounded to continue combat missions.
  - Several days later a patrol found the wreckage of two Zeros near the area and Lynch was officially credited with two victories.
- **NEI**
- B17s attack the airfield and AA guns at Koepang on Timor.
- **Australia**
- On 20th May 1942 the Air Board decided to make 45 squadrons the objective to be achieved by the end of the year.



Admiral JS McCain

- **South Pacific**
- Adm McCain, aboard USS Tangier at Noumea, assumes command as COMAIRSOPAC.

# 20 May

- **Land**
- **Burma**
- On 20th May, Burma Corps reached Imphal in India after a retreat of 1,000 miles, with the last stretch over the mountains, on foot, in the monsoon.
- Since the monsoon broke there had been no further pursuit by the Japanese.
- China now had no land communication with the outside world except the Silk Road across the Turkestan Desert to Russia—a route of no practical value because of Russia's intense pre-occupation with the German invasion.
- The only supply-line to China that remained was air transport across the Himalayan "Hump" from Dinjan to Kunming.
- **New Caledonia**
- May 20<sup>th</sup> the army units stationed in New Caledonia have been constituted as the Americal Division.
- The War Department has activated one Signal Pigeon detachment for station in New Caledonia. This is necessary for communications over the unusually rough terrain of the island.



# Air Route over the “Hump”



# 21 May

- **Sea**
- The Japanese radio station on Wake Island reported that AF was apparently running short of water and orders were issued for the invasion force to take on board extra supplies.
- At a CinCPac staff briefing Cmdr Layton was able to give an outline of the Japanese plan.
- Operation AL was to attack the western Aleutian Islands supported by a two carrier force after raiding American bases in Alaska.
- Operation AR required the main Japanese carrier force to strike at Midway in preparation for an invasion force setting out from Saipan covered by battleships and cruisers.
- It was thought probable that enemy submarines would patrol off Hawaii to give early warning of US fleet movements.
- Precise times and dates were still missing because they had been transmitted in a new five digit code for extra security.
- Certain important officers, both at Honolulu and in Washington, believed that these indications were an elaborate hoax to cover another raid on Pearl Harbour or even on the West Coast.
- Admiral Nimitz accepted the estimate of his fleet intelligence officer that Midway and the Aleutians were the real Japanese objectives.

# 21 May

- **Air**
- In May the American 101st Coast Artillery Battalion, armed with .5-inch anti-aircraft machine-guns, reached Moresby.
- By May American engineers had begun to help with airfield construction (at Moresby). A company of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Regiment and two negro units—the 96th Engineer Battalion and a section of the 576th Engineer Company—were sent to Port Moresby.
- B26s bomb aircraft at Lae.



THE PORT MORESBY CAUSEWAY, LOOKING TOWARD TATANA ISLAND (*General Johns in the foreground, third from left*).



# 22 May

- Writing in May 1942 to Bernard Baruch, an influential Democrat, Ferdinand Eberstadt, Chairman of the Army and Navy Munitions Board, observed that
- “unless synthetic rubber is available in quantity by the time the crude stockpile is exhausted, namely July 1 next year, we would appear to have no alternative but to call the whole thing off.”
- The “whole thing” to which he referred was World War 2.



Bernard Baruch and Churchill



# 22 May

- **Land**

- By 22nd May the six armoured regiments of the 1st Australian Armoured Division (5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th) had between them 142 tanks of various types;
- the three regiments of the 6th Armoured Brigade (12th, 13th, and 14th) had no tanks.
- In the 3rd Army Tank Brigade the 2nd Battalion had 20 Matildas while the 1st and 3rd Battalions had no tanks.
- on 22 May a flight by the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron inaugurated the movement of Kanga Force. The headquarters, most of the Independent Company and the mortar detachment, about 300 troops, and supplies were flown to Wau.

- **Air**

- Five B17s attack A/F and shipping at Rabaul while B26s hit A/F at Lae and attack shipping in the harbor.

## 22 May - Midway

- On Midway all underground fuel storage areas on Sand Island had been prepared for emergency destruction by demolition.
- On 22 May a sailor threw the wrong switch and blew up a good portion of the aviation gasoline.
- Pipe lines were also wrecked in the blast, and MAG-22 thereafter had to refuel all planes by hand from 55-gallon drums.



Burning oil tanks on Sand Island, Midway Atoll. These tanks were located near the southern shore of Sand Island. This view looks inland from the vicinity of the beach. Three Laysan Albatross ("Gooney Bird") chicks are visible in the foreground. Photo USN.

# 23 May

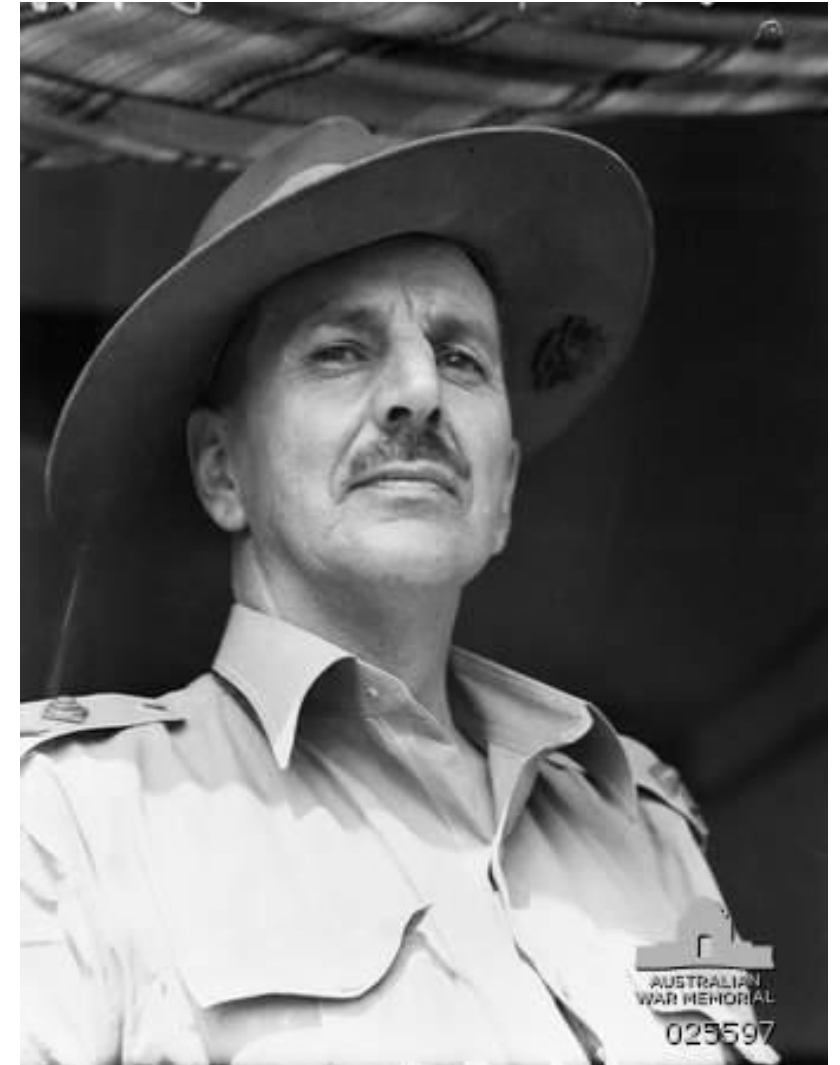
- **Air**
- On 23rd the 35<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron was sent on two missions to escort transports to Wau, but poor weather prevented the transports from getting through.
- B25s strike A/F and buildings at Lae.
- Wau airfield was a rough Kunai grass airstrip 3,100 feet (940 m) in length with a 12% slope heading directly for Mount Kaindi.
- Aircraft could approach from the northeast only, landing uphill and taking off downhill.
- The mountain at the end of the runway prevented second attempts at landing and precluded extension of the strip.
- Pilots had to manoeuvre Dakotas under clouds and through dangerous passes, "dodging a peak here and cloud there", landing at high speeds.
- This required good visibility, but the weather over the Owen Stanley Range was characterised by frequent storms, down drafts, and mists which rose from the jungle floor.

# 24 May - Intelligence

- The date and time of the attack on Midway remained obscure in the special code. The American code breakers had not wanted to waste time trying to figure it out. Then Lt Cmdr Wesley Wright took a crack at it after already putting in his regular 12 hour shift.
- As the night wore on Wright worked it out. The date and time cipher comprised a polyalphabetic with independent mixed cipher alphabets and with the exterior plain and key alphabets in two different systems of Japanese writing. Each has 47 syllables making the polyalphabetic tableau a gigantic one of 2,209 cells, more than three times as extensive as the ordinary Vigenere tableau of 676 cells. Nevertheless by 5.30 am he had a solution.
- The Aleutians would be attacked on 3 June and Midway on 4 June.
- This tied in with the calculations of the CinCPac intelligence staff allowing Cdr Layton to predict:
  - **“They will come in from the northwest on a bearing 325 degrees and will be sighted about 175 miles from Midway about 06.00.”**
- The Japanese had a new codebook which came into use on 24 May, but the important breaks had already been made.

# 24 May

- **Land**
- On 24th May Morris was instructed to provide a garrison for the new airstrip but was told that if the enemy launched a major attack it was to withdraw after having destroyed all weapons and supplies.
- **Air**
- **USA**
- Deployment of air units from eastern US is begun as a result of the threat of a naval attack on the west coast. 12th Bomb Group begins movement from Louisiana to California.
- **New Guinea**
- On 24 May eight B25s of the 13th Squadron USAAF led by its commander, Capt. Lowery, and flying as usual without escort, cut through a pass in the mountains, swept wide of Salamaua, and turned in toward Lae from the east.
- They were met head-on by a strong force of enemy fighters. Six or seven of the fighters were claimed shot down, but Captain Lowery's plane burst into flames and dove into the ocean, and
- one by one four other B-25s went down.
- A sixth bomber crash-landed on its return to Moresby.



MAJOR-GENERAL B.M. MORRIS.  
GOC NEW GUINEA FORCE.

# 24 May - Air

- **New Guinea**

- During April and May the 22nd Bomb Group (Medium) assumed a major responsibility for the run to Rabaul. Between 6 April and 24 May, the Group completed sixteen missions for a total of more than eighty sorties against Rabaul.
  - Hits were claimed on three transports, two merchant vessels, and one aircraft carrier in addition to the destruction of at least sixteen aircraft on the ground and ten in the air.
  - The B-26's were based in the Townsville area, and for the mission to Rabaul each plane was fitted with a 250-gallon bomb bay tank and took on a bomb load usually of 4 x 500-lb. bombs or 20 x 100-lb. bombs prior to the 600-mile flight to Port Moresby.
  - Having arrived there, preferably about dusk, an advance detachment of the group readied the planes for the next day's mission under cover of darkness. They would take off in the early morning, unless the start was delayed for the purpose of confusing the enemy's defense, and normally would follow a route that took them for forty or fifty miles along the New Guinea coast, then across the Owen Stanley range at approximately 7,000 feet, and through equatorial weather which frequently proved as dangerous as enemy fighters.
  - Over Rabaul, the Marauders made their runs at something under 10,000 feet, after which they turned for the 1,300-mile flight, broken again at Moresby, to their bases."

- **Alaska**

- An unidentified plane was sighted flying low over the Kiska naval station in the Aleutian Islands on 24 May. It was a single engine biplane similar to a Japanese naval observation plane.

# Townsville – Moresby – Rabaul bombing operations



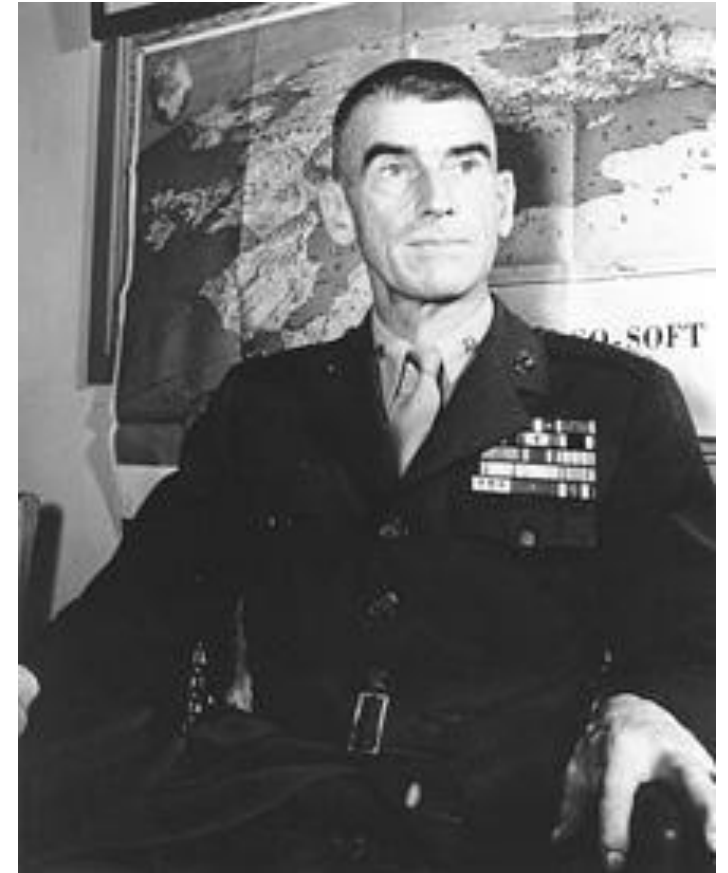
# 25 May - Midway

- On the 25<sup>th</sup> came two welcome changes to the picture on Midway.
- First, Nimitz passed the word that the Japanese attack was not now expected until early June, and
- second, the first reinforcements arrived. The USS *St. Louis* came in with the 37mm antiaircraft battery of the 3d Defense Battalion plus the two companies of Major Evans Carlson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Raider Battalion.
  - In 1937 Evans Carlson had been sent on a third tour of duty in China detailed to learn the Chinese language. While diligently studying the language he also obtained permission from Mao Tse Tung to go into the field with the Communist army fighting the Japanese in remote areas of China in 1938.
  - On his return he reported on the Chinese and Japanese armies to the Marine Corps and to President Roosevelt, who knew him from his service on the Marine detail at Warm Springs, the Presidents alternative White House.



# 25 May - Midway

- The US Marines are widely regarded as a very “Gung Ho” organisation, which is sometimes regarded as too much of a good thing.
- Carlson had been impressed with the excellence of the discipline, training and indoctrination of the Chinese Communist troops.
- When training the 2<sup>nd</sup> Raiders he adapted one of the Chinese inspirational slogans “Gung Ho” as a war cry for his unit.
- Introducing the phrase to the Marine Corps and the English language.



Evans Carlson

# 25 May

- Air
- 4 B17s bomb Rangoon during 24/25 May.
- 6 B17s bomb Vunakanau airfield at Rabaul. Five fighters intercepted, two are claimed probably shot down.



B17 returning to base

# 26 May

- **Sea**
- A report was received from the New Zealand Naval Board of indications of an enemy unit, probably a submarine, approximately 460 miles W.N.W. of Auckland (some 700 miles east of Sydney) in the evening of 26th May.
- A Japanese submarine is sighted in Alaskan waters near Cape Idak
- **Air**
- **USA**
- On 26<sup>th</sup> May the Commanding General, Army Air Forces was directed to move the 33<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> Fighter groups to the West Coast.
- **New Guinea**
- 14 P39s took off at 10.00 to escort 5 C 47 transports to Wau. Approaching Mt Lawson at 11.15 they were attacked by 15 Zeros. The Americans claimed four Japanese fighters for the loss of one P39 and the transports completed their mission without interference. One of the victories was credited to 1Lt Adkins who had previously scored two victories with 17th Pursuit over Java.

# 26 May - Midway

- Next day (May 26<sup>th</sup>) the aircraft tender Kittyhawk arrived (at Midway) with
  - the 3d Defense Battalion's 3 inch antiaircraft group,
  - the light tank platoon for the mobile reserve, and
  - the SBD-2s and the F4F-3s.
- The fuel supply was so critical after the demolition accident that the pilots who arrived on the Kittyhawk did not get a prebattle chance to check out in their SBD-2s.



US Army M3 Stuart light tank

# 27 May

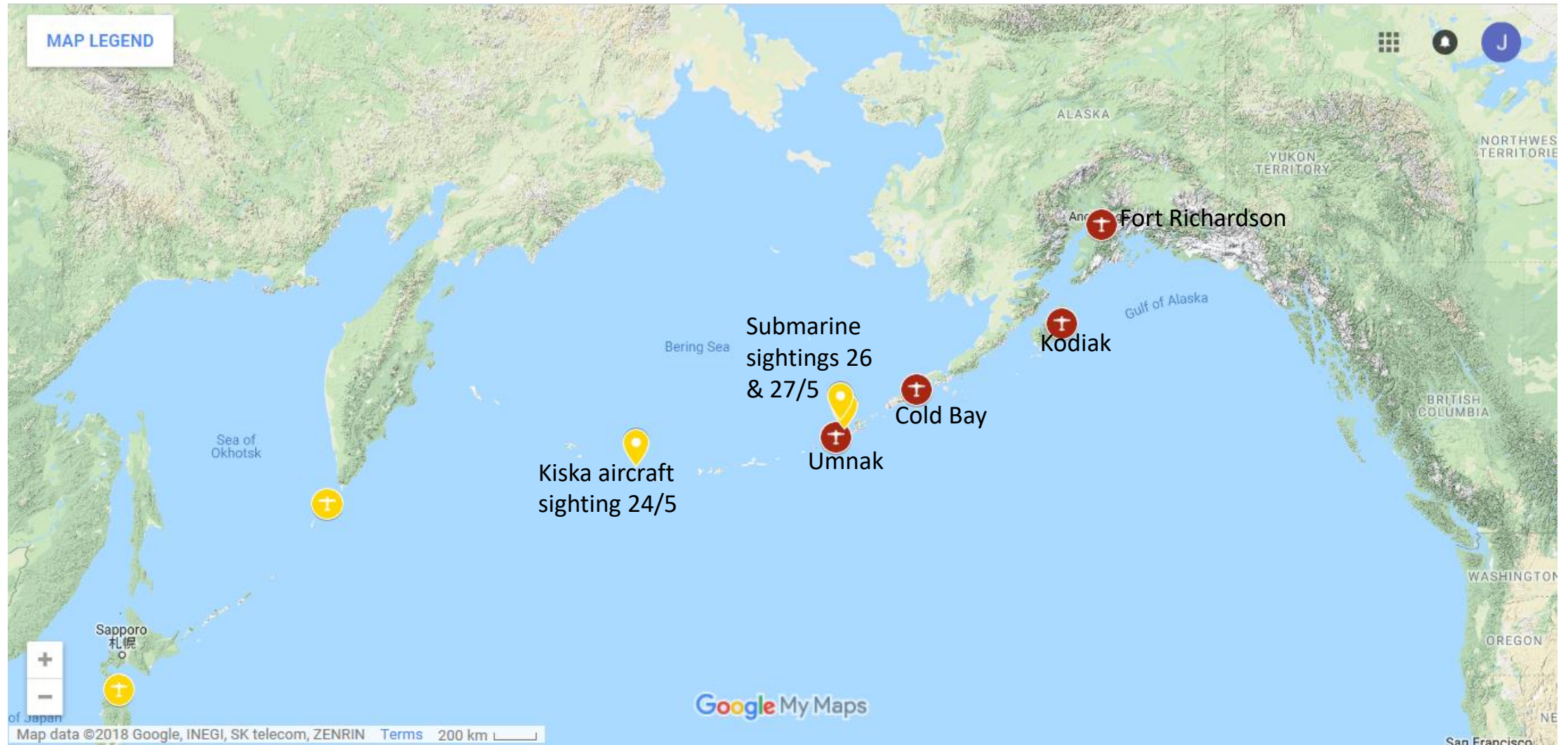
- **Sea**

- On the 27th, Admiral Theobald's force of 5 heavy cruisers and 4 destroyers arrived at Kodiak, Alaska.
- A Japanese submarine is sighted in Alaskan waters near Bogoslof Island.
- Yorktown limped into port at Pearl Harbour at 14.30 May 27 with her bowels in disorder from a bomb explosion and leaking from near misses.
  - Admiral Fitch had estimated that the dockyard would require 90 days to repair the damage.
  - The big dry dock took her in that afternoon and over 1,400 men swarmed in, over and under her.
  - Working in shifts 24 hours a day doing what was necessary to restore her strength and get her functional.
  - There was no time for plans or blue prints, templates of frames that needed replacement were fashioned in wood and hustled ashore to the workshops where the replacements were made in record time, carried aboard "at the double" and installed.
- Though unable to reinforce the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Somerville with Force A, the fast section of the British Eastern Fleet, sailed from Kilindini in a diversionary movement towards Ceylon to attempt to help the American Pacific Fleet in its coming encounter.

- **Air**

- Fifteen Zeros attack Port Moresby in mid morning. There was enough warning to scramble fourteen Airacobras of the 35th FS and 36th FS, which intercepted. Two P39s were lost, one pilot surviving. Two zeros were claimed.
- Six B17s bomb the base at Rabaul.

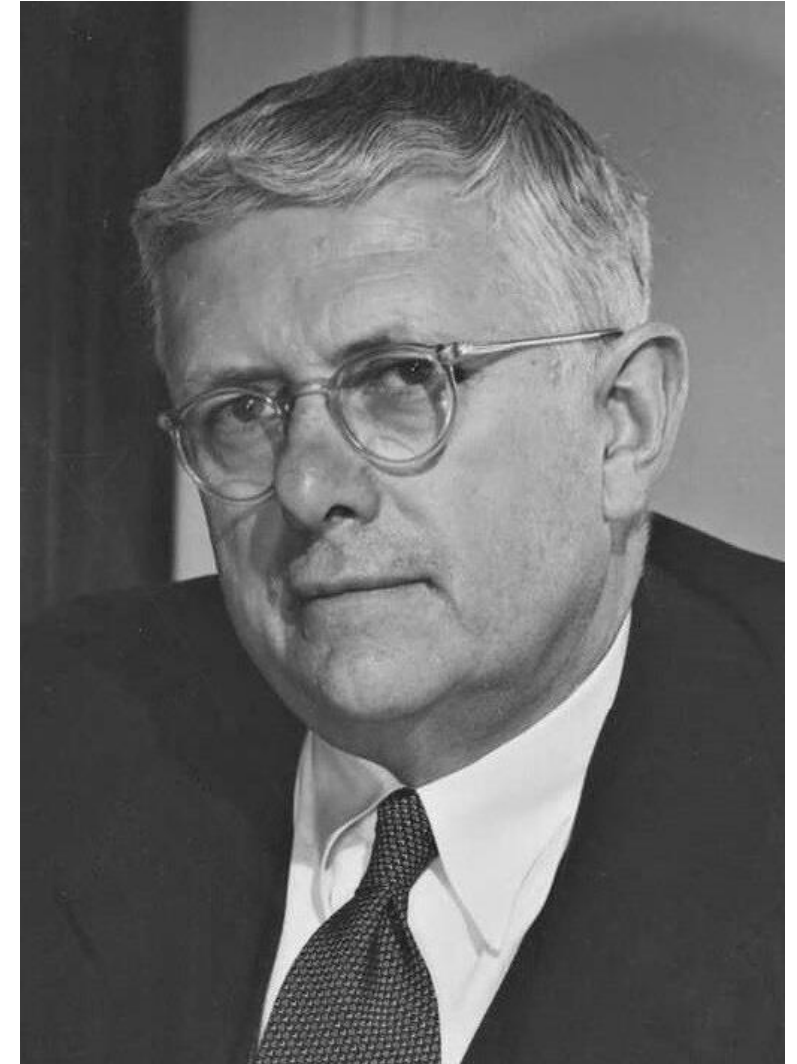
# Alaska and the Aleutians





# 28 May - Strategy

- On 28 May, in a series of telegrams to Curtin from London, Dr Evatt outlined the grand strategy decided upon by the United Kingdom and United States Governments during Mr Churchill's visit to Washington in December and January:
- The strategy contemplated Germany's defeat before that of Japan. In a phrase, it was "beat Hitler first".
- "The existence of this written agreement came as a great surprise to myself and, I have no doubt, to you. We were not consulted about the matter and neither Page [in London] nor Casey [in Washington] ever reported to us about it.
- Owing apparently to the U.S. Government's desire for secrecy it took some little insistence to get the document here."
- Commenting on this grand strategy, Evatt remarked that
  - in spite of the policy of "beat Hitler first", there was reiterated insistence in clauses in the document concerned that the security of Australia must be maintained,
- though a clause in an aide-memoire "of recent date" asserted "for a number of reasons, some of them very unconvincing,"
  - that a full-scale invasion of Australia is unlikely".



Dr H.V. Evatt Minister for External  
Affairs and Attorney General

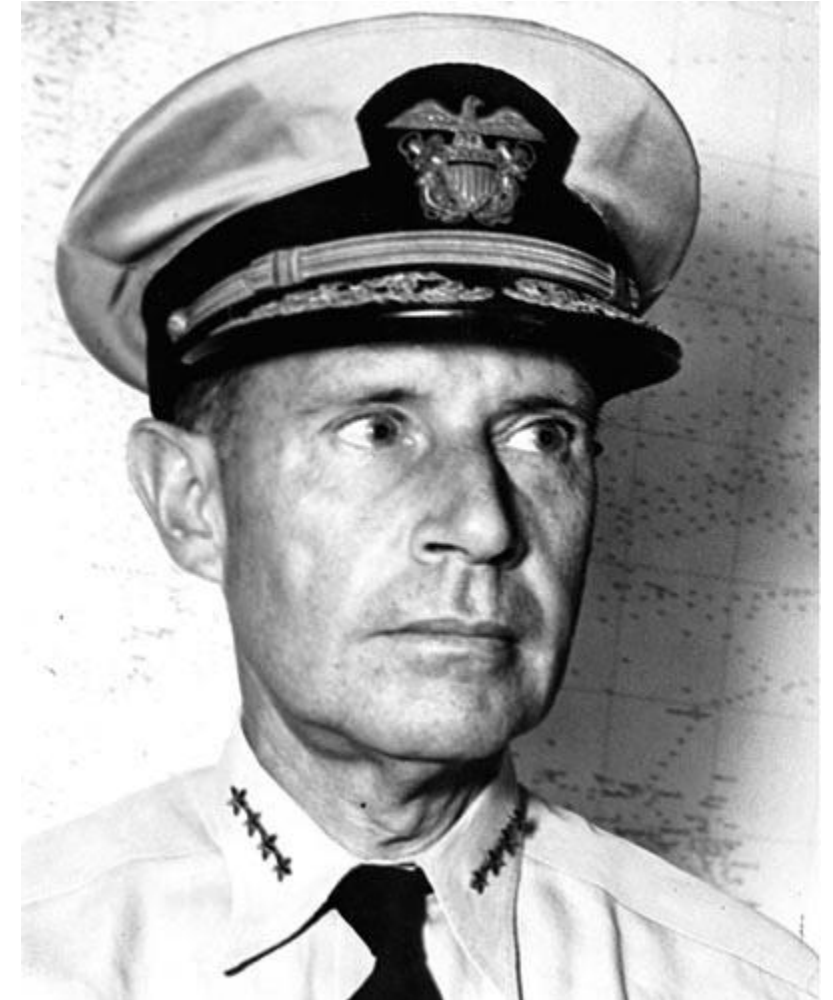
# 28 May - Strategy

- Broadly the essential features of the grand strategy were:
  - (1) the realisation of a victorious program of armaments, which first and foremost require the security of the main areas of war industry [the U.K. and the U.S.A.];
  - (2) the maintenance of essential communications;
  - (3) closing and tightening the ring around Germany;
  - (4) wearing down and undermining German resistance by air bombardment, blockade, subversive activities and propaganda;
  - (5) the continuous development of offensive action against Germany;
  - (6) maintaining only such positions in the Eastern Theatre as will safeguard vital interests and deny to Japan access to raw materials vital to her continuous war effort while we are concentrating on the defeat of Germany.
- This broad strategy remained "fundamentally unchanged" in May 1942, at the time of Evatt's telegrams, and he remarked "I think that we can now appreciate the background in which General MacArthur's directive was drafted."
  - The strategy defined in it was primarily defensive in character.
  - The offensive was to take place in the future."



# 28 May

- **Central Pacific**
- On 28 May the American main force to dispute the enemy's Midway invasion sailed from Pearl Harbour—Rear-Admiral Spruance's Task Force 16—the carriers Enterprise and Hornet, 6 heavy cruisers, and destroyers.
- **North Pacific**
- A B17 flies the first armed reconnaissance mission, from the secretly constructed airfield at Umnak, over the Aleutian Chain, but finds no sign of the enemy.
- XI Fighter Command elements are now deployed at Umnak (P-40's, P-38's), Cold Bay (P-40's), Kodiak (P-39's), and Ft Richardson (P-38's, RCAF Kittyhawks).



Admiral Spruance commanded the cruisers in Task Force 16. When Halsey had to be hospitalised he recommended Spruance to take over the task force.

# 28 May

- **South Pacific**
- On 28th May Vice-Admiral Ghormley, who in April was appointed to command the South Pacific Force and Area, hoisted his flag in U.S.S. Rigel in Auckland Harbour, New Zealand.
- The same day the Americans made another move north, shifting the original Efate garrison some 180 miles farther north in the New Hebrides, to form a new base ("Button " ) on the island of Espiritu Santo.
- On 28 May the Free French occupied Wallis Island.



Vice Admiral Ghormley

# 28 May - Air

- **South West Pacific**

- Evatt also advised Curtin that the British Government had decided to send a wing of three Spitfire fighter squadrons to Australia.
  - They would be shipped in a convoy leaving in the middle of June and would be fully maintained.
- Five B26s attack the airfield at Lae.
- 19 Airacobras from the 36th FS and 35th FS took off from 7-Mile Drome at 07.50 to intercept 20 Zeros over Port Moresby. Three aircraft are lost, but all pilots returned to duty. The 36th FS claims 3 Zeros (Connell, Egan, Erickson).
- At the end of May the A24s were withdrawn to Charters Towers. At Port Moresby they had flown only four combat missions, totalling twenty-nine sorties.
  - Though only two were lost in combat as against claims of six enemy planes destroyed on the ground and two shot down, operational losses were high.

# 29 May - COIC

## Enemy Forces (See Appendix)

(i) There are indications that two enemy striking forces are operating as follows -

- (a) The Northern Force including - 1 aircraft carrier (RYUJO)  
2 converted Carriers  
3 Heavy Cruisers ("NACHI" "ATAGO"  
12 Destroyers "TAKAO" )  
1 Submarine Squadron

is believed operating in the Kurile - Aleutian Islands area and is being supported by a heavy bomber force operating from the Northern Kurile Is.

(b) The Southern Force under the command of the C in C Second Fleet is still mobilising in the Saipan area. This force includes -

- 2 possibly 3 battle cruisers  
4 possibly 5 aircraft carriers ("AKAGI" "KAGA" "SORYU"  
"HIYU" & possibly "ZUIKAKU")  
2 Biplane Carriers ("CHIYODA" "CHITOSE")  
4 possibly 5 heavy cruisers (3-4 "Mogami's", one  
Destroyers "Tone" class)  
Special Base Establishment Unit  
Naval Landing Party Force

Supply vessels are believed to be mobilizing in the Truk and Marshall Is areas. Air searches are being maintained to a depth of 600 miles to the eastward from the Marcus Is. and Wake.

(c) The possible objective of the Northern Force is the Western Aleutians.

The possible objective of the Southern Force is the Hawaiian Group including Midway Is.



# 29 May - COIC

## 2. NAVAL INCIDENTS

(1) SYDNEY - An air raid warning was sounded at Sydney at 0507 today 29/5 on receipt of a report that a Curtiss Type Float Plane had been sighted over Sydney Harbour at approx 0420 (Graded B.1). Later reports indicated two unidentified float planes in Sydney Newcastle area. R.D.F. reports showed that aircraft were still in the area to seaward of Broken Bay at 0730.

These aircraft cannot be identified and allied aircraft have been detailed to investigate.

## 4. ENEMY'S PROBABLE NEXT MOVE

- (i) Attack on U.S. bases in Aleutian Islands.
- (ii) Attack on U.S. bases in Central Pacific including Midway and Hawaiian Islands.
- (iii) Consolidation of bases in Solomon Islands.
- (iv) Attack on Port Moresby area.
- (v) Increased submarine and surface raider activity in the Central and South West Pacific area.

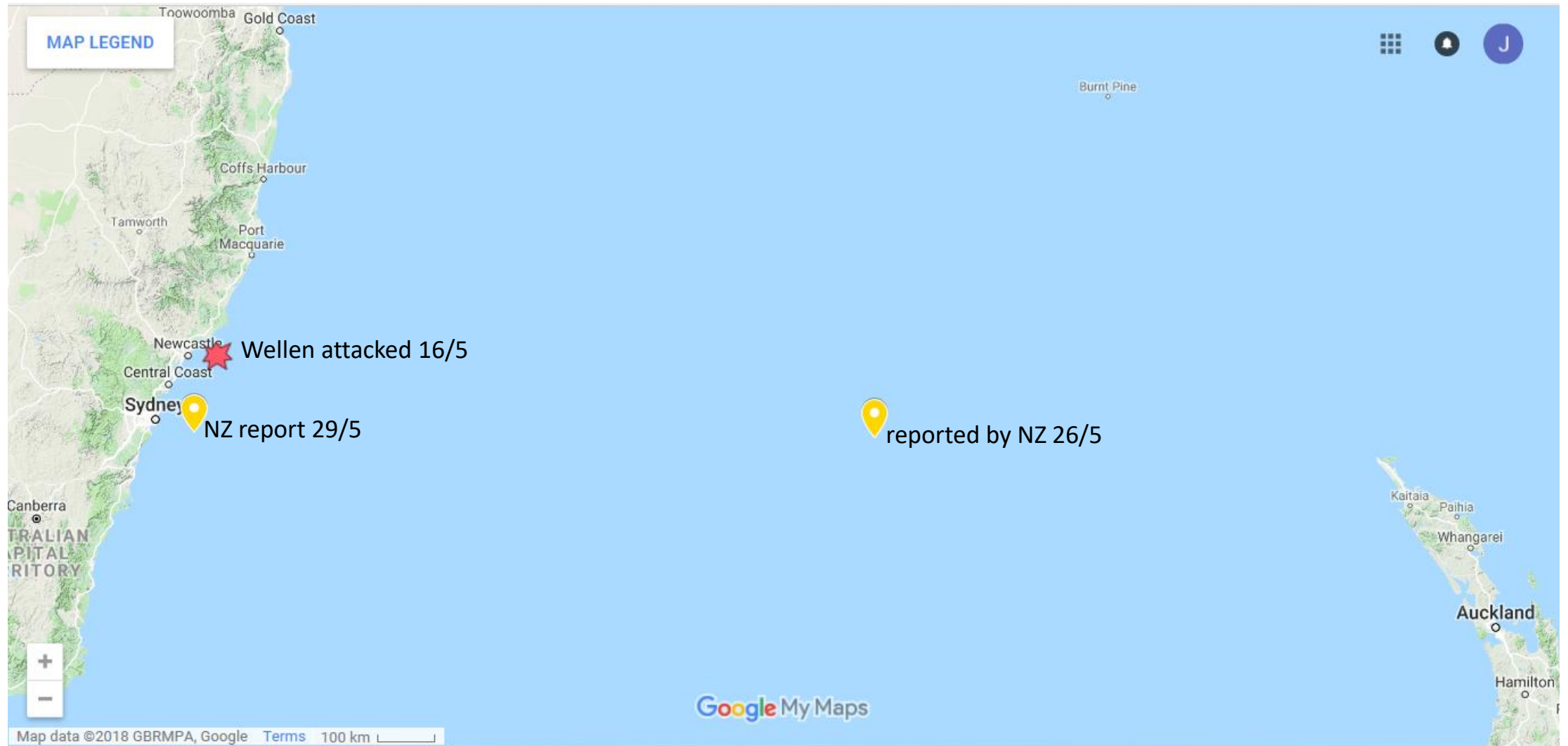
# 29 May

- **Central Pacific**
- At 11.00 May 29 the dock was flooded and Yorktown moved into the stream with hundreds of men still working on her. She fuelled and provisioned that afternoon.
- **South Pacific**
- A second New Zealand report indicated the presence of an enemy unit (probably that previously reported) approximately 40 miles E.S.E. of Sydney at 7.10 p.m., Eastern Australian Time, on 29th May.



*Yorktown* in drydock at Pearl Harbor on 29 May 1942, shortly before departing for Midway

# Submarines





# 29 May - Sea

- Skipjack returned to Fremantle having sunk three ships but these had not obliterated the memory of the unexplained torpedo failures. Coe wrote in his report:
  - “To make round trips of 8,500 miles into enemy waters to gain attack positions undetected within 800 yards of enemy ships only to find that torpedoes run deep and over half the time will fail to function, seems to me an undesirable manner of gaining information which might be determined any morning within a few miles of a torpedo station in the presence of comparatively few hazards”
- As far back as December Lt Cdr Jacobs, CO of Sargo, had experimented with shallow depth settings and had inactivated the magnetic exploder, hoping to account for the failure of 13 torpedoes to explode.
- Later he requested test firing to check depth control.
- Complaints to the Bureau of Ordnance brought the reply in February that the torpedoes ran four feet deeper than the setting only during the first half mile of their run.



James Wiggin (Red) Coe, CO USS Skipjack

# 29 May - Air

- **South West Pacific**

- 18 Zeros attacked Moresby in the morning. They were met by 17 P39s, which claimed three victories for one lost P39 whose pilot survived.
- Four Catalinas attacked flying boats, wharf and Fuel Dumps at *Tulagi* between 2300/L and 2345/L on 29/5. One F/B set on fire, AA posts silenced. Large fires and explosions caused at wharf. Fires visible for 80 miles.

- **China Burma India**

- 4 Heavy Bombers hit Myitkyina Airfield in high-altitude strike. No activity is seen.

- **North Pacific**

- Out along the Aleutians the weather had turned bad; beginning on 29 May it was practically prohibitive for flying.
  - Ceilings ranged from zero to 500 feet with visibility seldom exceeding five miles, and there was almost continual rain and fog.
  - At Umnak, conditions were extremely primitive. Combat crews set up their own tents and cooked their own meals.
  - Their bivouac area was a sea of mud; water covered the ground inside many of their tents and
  - all crews were on alert from dawn to dark, which in that latitude extended from 04.00 to 23.00.

# JIC 29<sup>th</sup> May

Japan. A report has been received that the TAIYO MARU, which was torpedoed and sunk near NAGASAKI on 8 May, had on board a large number of Japanese technicians enroute south to develop newly captured areas. The loss of nearly 2,000 of these men is believed to be a heavy blow.

Alaska. There are indications that a Japanese naval task force has departed from home waters in the direction of the ALUTIAN ISLANDS.

Kharkov. J.I.C. Comment: There is no information indicating any substantial change in the previously reported positions of the opposing forces. The German High Command continues to assert categorically that considerable Russian forces have been encircled and captured. The Russians assert that they are holding their own, but their language is more guarded.

# 30 May - Sea

- **Sydney**
- About 4.20 a.m. on 30th May a Curtiss-type biplane single-float aircraft, burning navigation lights, flew over Man-of-War anchorage in Sydney Harbour, twice circled U.S.S. Chicago lying at No. 2 Buoy, and departed due east.
  - The aircraft was heard and seen from Garden Island, and a duty officer there, Lieutenant Wilson, was sent out to Chicago to ask if they knew anything about it. He saw Chicago's officer of the watch, who replied that it was an American cruiser's aircraft.
  - It was pointed out that there was no American cruiser other than Chicago in the area—and the aircraft was not hers.
- An air raid warning was issued by Fighter Sector Headquarters at 5.7 a.m. (30<sup>th</sup> May), and later reports came in indicating the presence of two unidentified aircraft in the Sydney-Newcastle area, but searches by fighter aircraft found nothing.



USS Chicago in Sydney

# 30 May

- **South West Pacific**
- Tromp and Arunta with convoy "ZK .8" carrying 4,735 troops of the Australian 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade to reinforce Port Moresby reached their destination without incident at the end of the month.
- **China Burma India**
- Myitkyina is again hit by HBs. Again no activity is observed and the attacks are discontinued.
- **Central Pacific**
- Seventh Air Force begins flying B17s from Oahu to Midway in face of the expected attack on that island.



HMAS Arunta, a tribal class destroyer built by Cockatoo Docks and Engineering Company, commissioned 30 March 1942.

# 30 May - Sea

- **Central Pacific**
- At 09.00 on the 30th, Rear-Admiral Fletcher's Task Force 17, the hurriedly repaired Yorktown, with 2 heavy cruisers, and destroyers, left Pearl Harbor and followed Spruance towards Midway.
- Despite estimates that Yorktown, damaged at the Coral Sea, would require several months of repairs in Seattle, her elevators were intact and her flight deck largely so. The Pearl Harbor Naval Yard worked around the clock, and in 72 hours she was restored to a battle-ready state, judged good enough for two or three weeks of operations, as Nimitz required. Her flight deck was patched, and whole sections of internal frames were cut out and replaced. Repairs continued even as she sortied, with work crews from the repair ship USS Vestal still on board.
- Her new air group, a composite from three different carriers, landed on once the task force was at sea.

# 30 May - Sea

- Nimitz had sent out in the two Midway task forces and the North Pacific task force all the usable ships he had.
- Convoys from the West Coast to Hawaii had been stripped of their escorts, only the convoys to Australia and the South Pacific continued to be escorted by destroyers.
- The old battleships on the West Coast could not be used because they were too slow to keep up with the carriers and there was no alternative air cover or oil tankers to give them.
- Commander Layton estimated that the Japanese would have numerical superiority in all classes of ship.



Edwin T Layton,  
Fleet Intelligence Officer, Pacific Fleet



# 31 May – Sydney Harbour

- At Sydney Harbour the signature of an inward crossing was recorded on an indicator loop at 8 p.m. (31 May)
  - The fixed anti-submarine defences consisted of outer and inner indicator loops at the Heads, but the outer loops were out of action.
  - At the inner entrance to the harbour there was, in course of construction, an anti - torpedo boom, between George's Head on Middle Head, and Green Point on Inner South Head.
  - The centre portion was completed, but there were gaps at each end, though un-netted piles were in position in the western gap.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P00444.048

AERIAL VIEW OF THE BOOM DEFENCES IN SYDNEY HARBOUR, WHEN COMPLETED. LOOKING FROM GEORGE'S HEAD TOWARDS GREEN POINT.

# 31 May – Sydney Harbour

- Approximately fifteen minutes later (8.15 pm) Mr Cargill, a Maritime Services Board watchman, sighted a suspicious object caught in the anti-torpedo net near the west gate.
  - He and his assistant, Mr Nangle, investigated it in a skiff, and reported it to Yarroma (Lieutenant Evers) at about 9.30.
  - Apprehension that the object was a magnetic mine deterred Yarroma from closing it.
  - She reported "suspicious object in net" at 9.52 p.m., and was ordered to close and give full description, and
  - at 10.20 sent a stoker across in the Maritime Services skiff, while Lolita (Warrant Officer Anderson) closed the scene.
  - The stoker reported that the object was a submarine, and at 10.30 Yarroma signalled to Sydney naval headquarters:
  - "Object is submarine. Request permission to open fire."
  - Five minutes later there was an explosion in the submarine and it sank.



HMAS Yarroma in Sydney



# 31 May – Sydney Harbour

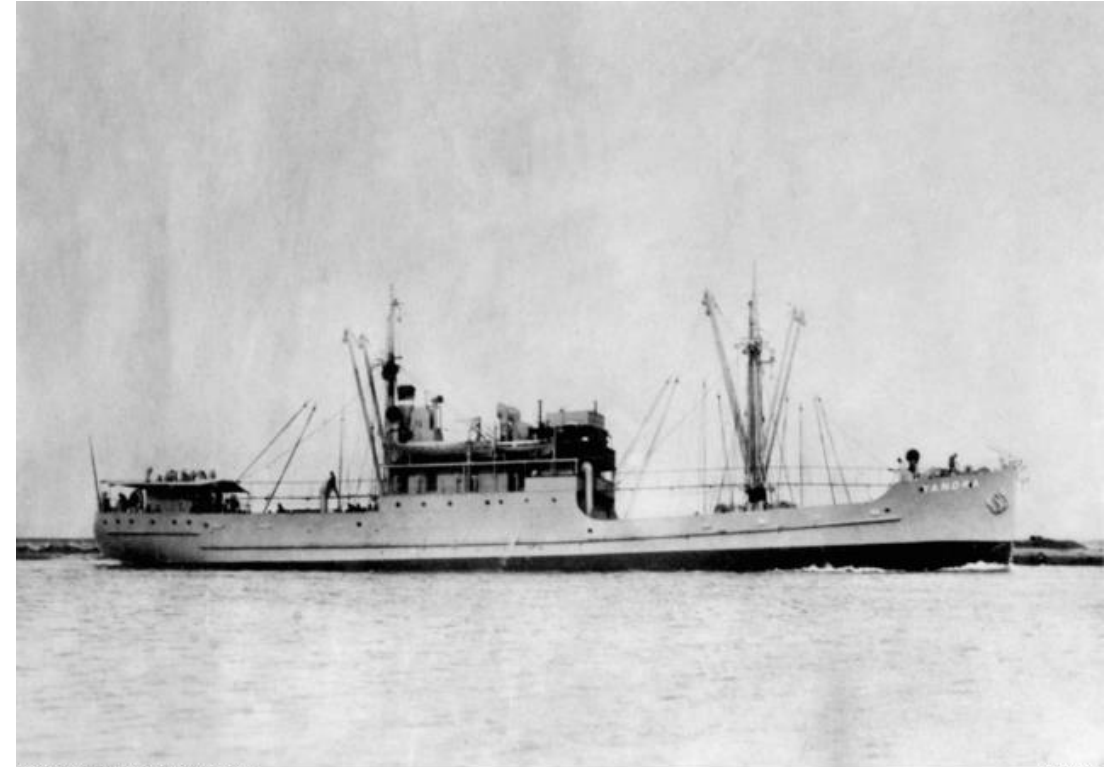
- Meanwhile, at 9.48, another inward crossing had recorded on the indicator loop.
- At 10.20 Captain Bode, Commanding Officer of USS Chicago, who had been on shore at "Tresco", the official residence of the N.O.I.C., left there for his ships "with the suggestion that he should go to sea with Perkins".
- At 10.27 p.m., and again at 10.36, the general alarm was given by the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Sydney, Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould. The 10.27 warning instructed all ships in Sydney Harbour to take anti - submarine precautions, and the port was closed to outward shipping.
- At approximately 10.50, Chicago, lying at No. 2 Buoy, sighted a submarine's periscope about 500 yards distant. She illuminated it by searchlight and opened fire with red tracer pom-pom.
- The submarine, steering towards the Harbour Bridge, passed about 200 yards off Garden Island in the path of the dockyard motor boat Nestor, which had to alter course to avoid. An observer on Garden Island ferry wharf saw it in Chicago's searchlight with the cruiser's shots "falling all round it".



Naval Officer-in-Charge, Sydney,  
Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould.

# 31 May – Sydney Harbour

- At 10.52 p.m. the naval auxiliary patrol boat Lauriana, on duty in the loop area with Yandra, sighted "a flurry on the water" ahead. She illuminated with her searchlight a submarine conning tower 60 to 80 feet distant, and being unarmed she signalled Port War Signal Station and Yandra.
- At 10.54 Yandra sighted the submarine's conning tower at a distance of 400 yards, three cables 28 degrees from Hornby Light.
  - She tried to ram the enemy "which appeared 100 yards astern, damaged, and slowly turning to starboard".
  - Contact was lost, but was regained by sighting at 600 yards five minutes later, and
  - at 11.07 Yandra attacked with a pattern of six depth-charges. "Submarine was not seen after explosions."



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

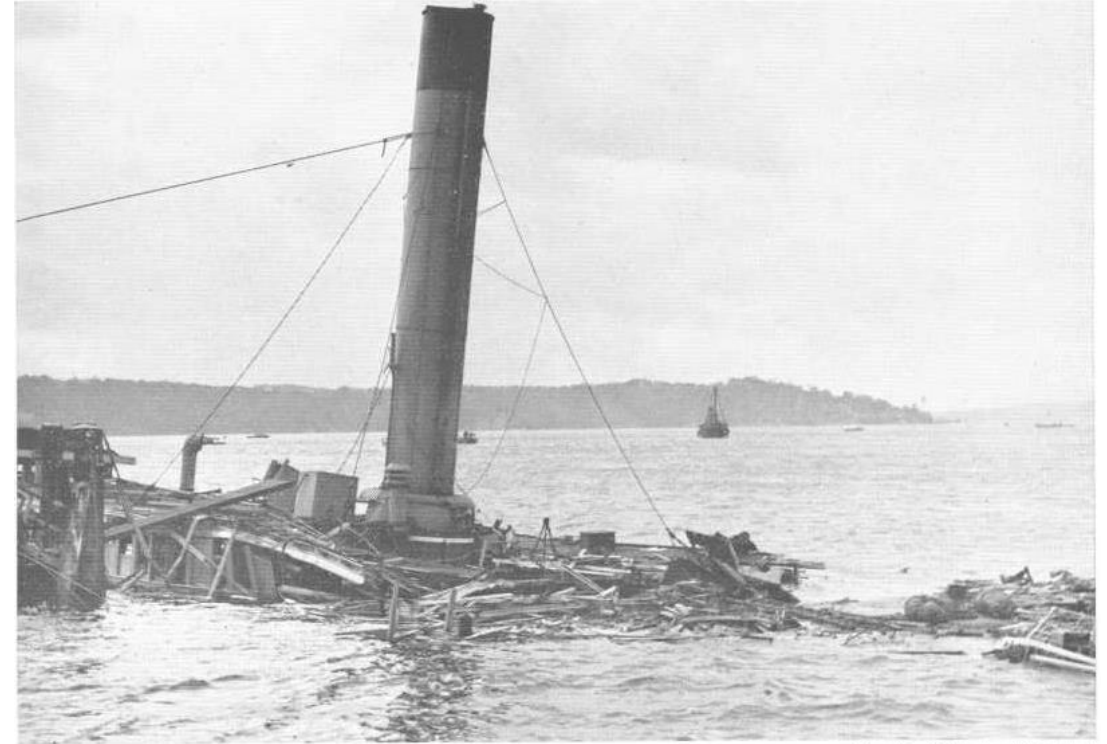
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THE CARGO VESSEL YANDRA BEFORE BEING TAKEN UP BY THE RAN FOR SERVICE AS AN AUXILIARY ANTI SUBMARINE VESSEL.



# 31 May – Sydney Harbour

- While all this was going on, the ferries continued to run. This was by Muirhead-Gould's direct order, since he felt that "the more boats that were moving about at high speed the better chance of keeping the submarines down till daylight".
- Ships continued to show lights, and it was not until 11.14 p.m. that the instruction "All ships to be darkened" was issued, and eleven minutes later before the graving dock floodlights were extinguished.
- At 11.10 p.m. Geelong, from her berth alongside at Garden Island, fired at a suspicious object in the direction of Bradley's Head. Both Geelong and Whyalla alongside her, illuminated the Bradley's Head area by searchlight for some time without again sighting anything.
- At 11.25 the graving dock floodlights blacked out.



(R.A.N. Historical Section)

Wreck of *Kuttabul* after the Japanese midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour, night 31st May-1st June 1942.

At 11.30 an underwater explosion wrecked HMAS Kuttabul, a Navy depot ship converted from a Sydney Harbour ferry, and caused a number of casualties in her, 18 killed, one missing believed killed, 10 wounded.





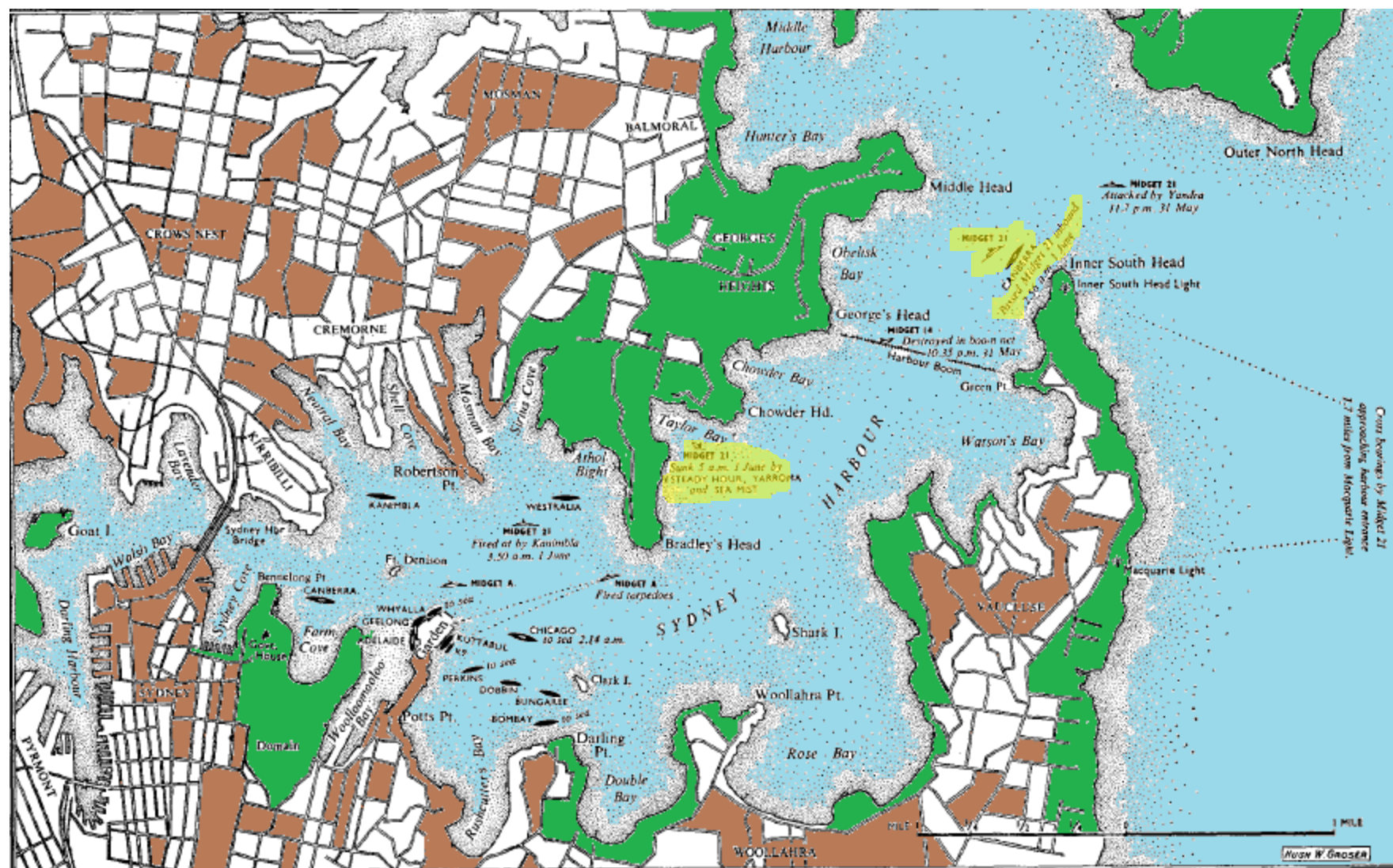
# 31 May – Sydney Harbour

- At 2.30 the four "stand off" Channel Patrol Boats in Farm Cove were ordered to proceed on patrol, Toomaree to the east boom gate, Marlean and Sea Mist to the west gate, and Steady Hour to join Lolita and Yarroma at the boom.
- At this time it was believed that a third submarine was in the harbour, because an indicator loop crossing was registered at 1.58 a.m.
- *Chicago*, while proceeding to sea sighted a periscope almost alongside, and signalled "Submarine entering harbour" at 3 a.m. and one minute later an inward crossing was registered on an indicator loop.
- At approximately 5 a.m. Sea Mist, at the request of minesweeper Goonambee (patrolling from Bradley's Head to the west gate) investigated a suspicious object in Taylor Bay.
- She illuminated it with an Aldis lamp, identified it as a submarine, and made two depth-charge attacks, simultaneously firing red Very lights.
- These and the explosions brought Yarroma hot-foot to the scene, to find Sea Mist attacking what that boat reported as "three submarines".



HMAS Steady Hour

Yarroma and Sea Mist were shortly joined by Steady Hour, and from then on until 8.27 a.m. intermittent depth charge attacks were delivered on submarine contacts recorded by detection gear and by visual "sightings"



# 31 May – Sydney Harbour

- In the subsequent analysis the 1.58 loop crossing was determined as an outward crossing—that of a Midget, leaving the harbour after having fired her torpedoes and completed her mission.
- It was subsequently discovered that Kuttabul was sunk by one of two torpedoes which, fired at Chicago by a Midget from the direction of Bradley's Head, passed under the Dutch submarine K 9, and struck the harbour bed beneath Kuttabul, where it exploded.
- The other torpedo ran on shore on Garden Island and failed to explode. Possibly the blacking out of the graving dock floodlights just prior to the attack was responsible for the cruiser's escape.
- The Japanese had also attacked the British fleet at Diego Suarez in Madagascar with midget submarines.
- A Japanese reconnaissance aircraft had flown over Diego Suarez harbour and the battleship Ramillies 38 hours before the first Midget was discovered in Sydney. Ramillies was then torpedoed and a tanker, British Loyalty, was sunk 17 hours before the attack on Sydney.



The unexploded torpedo at Garden Island after the attack

## 31 May - Sea

- After declining from a record level in April, merchant shipping losses climbed again in May to 730,000 tons or an annual rate of 8,760 000 tons.
- American defences along the US east coast were beginning to become effective but the U Boats moved on and over half the losses were sunk by submarines in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.

# 31 May

- **Land**
- By 31st May all of Kanga force had been flown into Wau.
- **Air**
- B17s attack Lae and Salamaua.
- During May Moresby had been attacked twenty-one times, Darwin, for a change, remained free of bombing during the month.
- B17s on detachment at Midway begin search operations.
- By the last day of May it (VII Bomber Command) had in commission 44 out of 56 available B-17s, 14 of 16 B-18s, 4 of 6 B-26s, and 5 of 7 A-20s.
- On 30 and 31 May, in order to place the heavy bombers as far forward as possible, fifteen B17s of VII Bomber Command were flown up to Midway. In addition four torpedo-carrying B26s were flown up to Midway, along with six of the Navy's new TBFs.

# 31 May - Midway

- By 31 May there were 107 aircraft on the (Midway) island
- For the ground forces and key civilian workers who had remained behind to help defend Midway, the week had been busy. Reinforcing weapons were installed, tanks tested in the sand, all defensive concentrations registered in, and the emplacing of an extensive system of obstacles, mines and demolitions completed.
  - Sand Island now was surrounded with two double-apron barbed wire barriers, and all installations on both islands were ringed by protective wire.
  - Antiboat mines of sealed sewer pipe, and obstacles of reinforcing steel lay offshore;
  - the beaches were sown with homemade mines of ammunition boxes filled with dynamite and 20-penny nails;
  - cigar box antitank mines covered likely beach exits; and
  - bottles of molotov cocktail stood ready at every position.
  - A decoy mockup airplane (a JFU—Japanese fouler-upper) was spotted prominently on the seaplane apron.
- A final load of drummed Avgas arrived in the chartered freighter Nira Luckenbach in the afternoon of 31 May. There was a dispute about overtime with the merchant marine crew, but the officers and boatswains manned winches and tended hatches so that the Marines could unload the cargo that night.

# Midway Atoll

