

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 363

“Scratch One Flattop!”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the aftermath of the Doolittle Raid, Admiral Yamamoto’s plan to attack at Midway suddenly made a lot of sense, but even as the Imperial Japanese Navy prepared for that assault, they were also continuing their campaign in the Solomon Islands.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 363. Scratch One Flattop!

Last week, when we talked about the Doolittle Raid, I also told you about a debate in the Japanese Navy over Admiral Yamamoto’s proposal to ambush the US Pacific Fleet at Midway, versus the plan most of the Admiralty preferred: to advance down through the Solomon Islands in the Southwest Pacific, with the goal of taking Samoa, Fiji, and New Caledonia, thus cutting Australia off from US support and reinforcement. The ultimate goal was to deny the Allies the use of the ports and airfields of northern Australia as bases from which to attack Japanese positions in the East Indies.

The other admirals were unenthusiastic about Yamamoto’s plan until the Doolittle Raid, which came in April 1942, after which it suddenly seemed logical to take Midway. Once captured and garrisoned, Midway could serve as a forward base to defend the Home Islands against any future such raid. Understand that was not Yamamoto’s primary purpose in wanting to attack Midway. He was looking to ambush the US Pacific Fleet. The other admirals were more interested in Midway than the ambush, but no matter. The Japanese Navy spent May 1942 preparing to assault Midway and also land forces in the Aleutian Islands, and then executed these operations in the first week of June.

I’ll tell you how that went next week, but even as the Japanese made those preparations, they were also proceeding with their campaign to seize bases in the Southwest Pacific, and this is what I want to look at today. The Americans are stepping up operations in the Pacific by this

time, spring of 1942, and you may be wondering what happened to that agreement between Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill that they would pursue a “Germany first” strategy? At this stage of the war, the UK is clearly observing that priority; it is equally clear that the US is not. What gives?

First, there isn't much the British can do in the Pacific after the loss of Singapore. British involvement in this theater is mostly limited to holding the line along the border between Japanese-occupied Burma and British-controlled India. On the other hand, the US is limited in what it can do in the European theater. Just now, the Americans are mostly fighting the U-boat war in the Atlantic—also a naval operation, you'll note—while in the Pacific, the Japanese are on the move. Like it or not, the Americans have to defend Alaska and Hawaii, and they are the only nation with the means to prevent the isolation of Australia and perhaps New Zealand as well. There is also the emotional reason that Americans are still furious with the Japanese over the attack on Pearl Harbor last December. It's payback time.

We've already seen the Japanese capture the port of Rabaul, on the island of New Britain, in late January 1942. Rabaul was intended to be the linchpin of the Japanese defensive line in this part of the Pacific, and large numbers of soldiers and aircraft were to be stationed there. In March, the Japanese seized the port of Lae on the northern coast of New Guinea, and the island of Bougainville and stationed air units in both places.

By the way, all these islands—New Britain, eastern New Guinea, and Bougainville—were all formerly German territories. Since the last war, Australia had been governing them under a League of Nations mandate.

During the seizure of Lae, the aircraft carriers USS *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, operating in the waters south of New Guinea, sent their planes across the island to attack Japanese ships supporting the invasion. The Americans sank three of the four transport ships bringing Japanese soldiers to Lae; fortunately for the Japanese, the transports were close enough to shore that they could run themselves aground and debark the soldiers. Otherwise, the casualty numbers would have been much higher.

The lesson the Japanese learned was that two American carriers were operating in the region and prepared to launch air strikes against any vulnerable Japanese naval force. Their long-range goal was to take Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia and isolate Australia, and that wouldn't change, but the Japanese would have to be more careful about ensuring their naval operations came with adequate air support.

In order to accomplish this, the Japanese planned to execute their usual leapfrog down the Solomon Islands; that is, capture an island, base air units there, which would provide air cover for the next landing, and so on. In addition to land-based air cover, the Navy sent Japan's two newest and largest fleet carriers, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, to the region, along with the light carrier *Shoho*. They would provide enough air cover to keep the American carriers in check.

The two carriers arrived in April, and the Japanese were ready for the next stage of this campaign by early May. On May 4, a Japanese task force escorted by *Shoho* landed 400 soldiers on the tiny island of Tulagi, at the southern end of the Solomon Islands, which were controlled by the British. The British had based their administration of the Solomon Islands there on Tulagi. The small Australian garrison evacuated the island before the Japanese arrived.

But the previous evening, the Japanese invasion force was spotted on its way, and news of the pending invasion reached the carrier USS *Yorktown*. Under orders to maintain radio silence, *Yorktown* could not signal *Lexington*, but nevertheless proceeded toward Tulagi and launched an air strike the following morning that reached Tulagi just before 9:00 AM. The Japanese were taken by surprise in port. The destroyer *Kikuzuki* was hit by a bomb and eventually sank, while the other ships headed for the open ocean. *Yorktown* launched two further air strikes that day that sank or damaged a few smaller ships.

Yorktown had not prevented the invasion and occupation of Tulagi, but it had sunk a destroyer, which was as much damage as any American ship had been able to deal out to the Japanese Navy since the war began. Afterward, *Yorktown* rendezvoused with *Lexington* and they set course toward New Guinea, in search of bigger fish.

Parallel to the invasion of Tulagi, the Japanese were planning another, far larger operation for a far more important target. By this time, US Navy cryptanalysts were having increasing success with reading the Japanese Navy's coded messages. As early as March, they had been picking up references to an Operation MO. In April, British codebreakers passed on to the Americans the news that those two fleet carriers, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, had been ordered to support Operation MO. The British and the Americans agreed that the likely target of Operation MO was Port Moresby.

Port Moresby was the largest city on New Guinea. It lies on the southern coast of the island, facing Australia, as it were, which in turn lies on the other side of the Coral Sea. The Japanese wanted Port Moresby because it would secure their control over all of New Guinea. Planes based at Port Moresby could range across the Coral Sea, making it unsafe for Allied ships, and attack the northern Australian coastal towns of Cooktown and Townsville, where the Australians and Americans based their bombers, and where American ships were bringing soldiers and equipment.

At Pearl Harbor, Chester Nimitz decided that opposing Operation MO was worth deploying all four American carriers, and he sent *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, recently returned from the Doolittle Raid, toward New Guinea to assist, but they would not be able to reach the scene in time and would return to Pearl Harbor. Their next mission would be the Battle of Midway, but we'll get to that next week.

Yorktown and *Lexington* proceeded to the Coral Sea. The Japanese knew from the attack at Tulagi that an American carrier was operating somewhere to their south, though at this point they

only expected to find one. The Japanese set up a picket line of submarines to watch for this American carrier, as was their usual practice, but the US carriers were already past the submarines by the time the subs reached their assigned locations.

The invasion of Port Moresby was to be a far larger operation than the seizure of Tulagi. A force of 5,000 Japanese soldiers would attack the town, escorted by two fleet carriers, one light carrier, six cruisers, and fifteen destroyers. They left Rabaul on the same day as the invasion of Tulagi, May 4. The Allied force moving to intercept was similar in size: two fleet carriers, six US cruisers and two Australian cruisers, and thirteen destroyers.

The Japanese spotted the Americans first. At 7:45 AM on May 7, a scout plane from *Shokaku* reported sighting one carrier, one cruiser, and three destroyers to the south of the Japanese task force. In fact, the pilot had gotten a little too excited. What he had actually seen was an American oiler, which was returning to Australia after having refueled ships in the American task force, along with a single destroyer acting as its escort.

The task force commander, Admiral Takagi Takeo, immediately ordered the launch of all planes from both *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* to attack the supposed carrier, 78 aircraft in all.

At about 8:30, minutes after those planes were in the air and on their way, another Japanese scout plane reported sighting the actual American task force, which was to the northwest. Takagi was puzzled by this, but concluded the Americans had two separate carrier task forces, so he decided to allow the air strike already headed to the south to continue, while ordering the ships in his task force to head northwest to intercept the second sighting.

That second sighting, the American task force to the northwest, was disturbing, because the Americans were supposed to be south of Takagi's carriers, not north. The Port Moresby invasion force was north of Takagi, whose mission was to guard against American carriers approaching from the south. If the Americans were to the northwest, that meant they were already past Takagi and closing on the invasion force he was meant to be protecting.

Meanwhile, the American task force was also sending out search planes. At about the same time Takagi was hearing about the Americans to his northwest, a US search plane was reporting back to *Yorktown* that it had sighted the Japanese invasion force. Due to a miscommunication, Admiral Frank Fletcher, the American task force commander, thought that the search plane had reported seeing two carriers. Fletcher concluded that must be the Japanese carrier force, and ordered *Lexington* and *Yorktown* to attack it with everything they had, 93 planes in all.

The Japanese strike force reached what they were expecting to be an American carrier task force at 9:15 AM, but all they found was one oiler and one destroyer. The Japanese planes spent the next 90 minutes circling the area, searching for the aircraft carrier they knew had to be there somewhere, before they realized the scout plane had misidentified that oiler as a carrier. They reported this back to Takagi, who now realized that the second sighting, the one to his northwest,

must be the real American carrier force. He ordered the planes to return to their carriers at once, except for the dive bombers, who were ordered first to sink the two American ships, which they did.

At this same moment, and about 150 miles to the northwest, the American strike force found the Japanese Port Moresby invasion force, escorted by the light carrier *Shoho*. The American pilots went all in on an attack on the carrier. Minutes later, *Lexington* received a radio report from Commander Robert Dixon, leader of one of the two dive bomber squadrons, who exclaimed, "Scratch one flattop!" *Shoho* was sunk, with the loss of over 600 Japanese lives; this was the first time the US Navy had sunk a Japanese ship larger than a destroyer.

That afternoon, after the Americans returned to their carriers, Admiral Fletcher was pondering a second strike on the Port Moresby invasion force. He decided against it, because the whereabouts of *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* were still unknown to him, and it was unlikely his scout planes could find the enemy carriers before nightfall. He chose instead to wait until the following morning; in the meantime, his two carriers would keep some fighter planes at the ready in the event of a Japanese air strike.

In Rabaul, the overall commander of Operation MO, Admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi, ordered the invasion force to turn back. The Americans were too close; invasion of Port Moresby would have to wait. He ordered Takagi's task force to hunt down and sink the American carriers. Just before dusk, Takagi had *Zuikaku* send out 27 search planes to hunt for the Americans. It was getting dark and the weather was turning bad; the Japanese scouts found nothing and turned back, but the Americans picked them up on their radar and Fletcher sent his fighters to intercept them. They shot down nine of the Japanese planes; the others scattered. Six of the Japanese planes that scattered came across *Yorktown* and, believing it was one of their own carriers, attempted to land on it before they were driven off by American anti-aircraft fire.

As the pilots on both sides tried to get what sleep they could, their commanders spent the night planning to begin the search for enemy carriers as soon as possible the next morning. At the break of dawn, minutes apart, both task forces sent out search planes.

Two hours later, and again just minutes apart, a Japanese scout plane found the American task force and an American scout plane reported the location of the Japanese task force. They were about 240 miles apart. Both fleets turned toward each other and prepared to launch their air strikes.

The Americans found their target first: *Shokaku*. *Zuikaku* was miles away and hidden in a cloudbank, so the US planes went at *Shokaku* with everything they had. Once again, the American torpedo bombers failed to score a single hit, but the dive bombers landed three bombs on the carrier's deck, causing heavy damage.

As the American strike on *Shokaku* proceeded, radar aboard *Lexington* detected the incoming Japanese air strike while it was still eighty miles away. The American carriers launched fighters to intercept.

The Japanese torpedo bombers struck first, concentrating their efforts against *Lexington*, which was hit by two torpedoes. *Yorktown* escaped undamaged, but then came the dive bombers. *Yorktown* was hit square in the middle of its flight deck by an armor-piercing bomb, which penetrated below decks before exploding, causing serious damage. *Lexington* suffered two less serious bomb strikes.

After attacking their enemies, both sides' strike forces returned to their carriers. Despite the damage they had taken, all four carriers were able to recover their planes. By this time, after a day and a half of combat, both sides' ships were running low on fuel. The Americans lost 69 aircraft, while the Japanese had lost more. Admiral Takagi informed his superiors that his task force had too few aircraft left to continue operations, although he claimed his air strike had sunk both American carriers. On the American side, Admiral Fletcher had two damaged carriers while the Japanese still had at least one undamaged, and he judged it was time to withdraw.

At this moment, Fletcher had reason to feel satisfied. Both sides had been bloodied in the battle, but his task force had sunk a Japanese destroyer and then a light carrier, and had lost only a destroyer and an oiler. No one knew it at the time, but one of the torpedo hits on *Lexington* had cracked a tank storing aviation fuel. Gasoline fumes spread through the ship until they found a spark, and exploded. Late in the afternoon, the order was given for the crew of *Lexington* to abandon ship. Once the crew was off, an American destroyer fired four torpedoes, and *Lexington* went under.

The loss of *Lexington* now meant that the American side's losses had been heavier, but Fletcher's task force had forced the Japanese to postpone Operation MO, making this the first time such a large Japanese naval operation had been thwarted.

So who won, exactly? Both sides claimed victory. On May 9, *The New York Times* ran a headline that read: JAPANESE REPULSED IN GREAT PACIFIC BATTLE, WITH 17 TO 22 OF THEIR SHIPS SUNK OR CRIPPLED: ENEMY IN FLIGHT, PURSUED BY ALLIED WARSHIPS. That was a bit of an overstatement.

Japanese newspapers ran similar claims, that the Americans had suffered a devastating defeat and panic was setting in among the upper echelons of the United States Navy. Even Adolf Hitler could not resist gloating that "any United States warship which accepts action with the Japanese naval forces is as good as lost."

The Japanese jubilation was for real. They did believe that both American carriers had been sunk, which meant that the Americans had lost half of their carrier strength in the Pacific. They would surely have to keep their surviving carriers at Pearl Harbor to defend Hawaii, meaning

they must cede the Southwest Pacific to Japan. The campaign to take Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia could proceed, and any doubts the Admiralty had about the wisdom of the assault on Midway were put to rest.

American submarines prowled the seas between the East Indies and Japan, hoping to strike at the vulnerable *Shokaku* as it returned to Japan for repairs, but both of the Japanese carriers reached home safely. *Shokaku* was repaired in under a month, but the surviving air crews of both carriers were inadequate, even that of the undamaged *Zuikaku*, meaning both ships would have to sit out the upcoming Battle of Midway until their planes and pilots could be replaced. These were skilled pilots lost; the Japanese pilot training program would prove inadequate, turning out only small numbers of insufficiently trained flyers.

Admiral Nimitz ordered *Saratoga* back to Pearl Harbor for repairs. In Australia, Australian and American military commanders assumed the Japanese would make a second try for Port Moresby, and from there launch an invasion of Australia. Australian soldiers were sent to reinforce Port Moresby in the hope of preventing, or at least delaying, the coming offensive.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was the first naval engagement in history in which the opposing fleets never came within sight of each other, and was further proof, if proof was needed, that naval warfare had irrevocably changed. The commanders on both sides were new to this kind of fighting, but were quickly learning.

[music: *Pacific Waters*.]

Nishino Gen was a Japanese newspaper reporter for the Osaka newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun*. Already a veteran of war reporting in China, in 1942, he was assigned to follow the Japanese 17th Army, which was on its way to invade New Caledonia. He had gotten as far as the port of Davao, on Mindanao in the Japanese-occupied Philippines, when on June 10, he and some other reporters joined some officers of the 17th Army at their hotel to celebrate the American defeat at Midway.

Nishino wasn't so sure about that. The accounts of the battle from the Japanese Navy were suspiciously vague as to the details, so later that evening, he sat down with a shortwave radio and scanned the frequencies until he found a broadcast originating from San Francisco. The American announcer boasted of a great American victory at Midway, which Nishino was prepared to dismiss as enemy propaganda, until she described the battle in detail and name-checked four Japanese aircraft carriers—*Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Soryu*, and *Hiryu*—as having been sunk. A sense of dread came over him as he realized it was quite likely the Americans were telling the truth.

Nishino kept his doubts to himself; spreading defeatism could land him in prison. But he felt his suspicions confirmed when he learned that the 17th Army's mission had changed. Instead of New Caledonia, they were now to reinforce Japanese positions on New Guinea and in the Solomon

Islands. Nishino was told the name of a specific island in the Solomons, but the name meant nothing to him and he couldn't find it on a map. It was called Gadrukanaru. The military was building an airfield there, where they would station bombers that could attack American ships headed for Australia.

Nishino was not told, but surmised, that the disaster at Midway had caused the Japanese Navy to scratch the plan to take New Caledonia and Fiji and Samoa. Japan was suspending offensive actions to concentrate on reinforcing and defending what it already held.

Back in March, when General Douglas MacArthur had left the Philippines for Australia, he was assigned to lead a joint US-Australian command in the Southwest Pacific. This command was to extend from east of Singapore to the Solomon Islands. The rest of the Pacific, from east of the Solomons through to Alaska, was the responsibility of Admiral Chester Nimitz in Pearl Harbor.

Just as in Japan, where the Army and Navy competed for resources and the right to choose where and when the next operation would take place, a similar competition was taking place between General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz.

For General MacArthur, the issue was as clear as day. Most of the weight of the Japanese offensive was coming down in his area of responsibility; therefore, he should be getting most of the soldiers, equipment, and support from the USA. After the Battle of Midway, MacArthur contacted Washington with a bold plan: the enemy was reeling, so now was the time to move against the Japanese base at Rabaul. MacArthur believed he could lead a quick strike that could seize Rabaul in a matter of weeks and open the path toward the East Indies and the Philippines. All he needed, apart from the three infantry divisions he already commanded, was a division of Marines and a naval task force that included two carriers.

MacArthur's superior, Army chief of staff George Marshall, thought this sounded pretty good and ran it by Chief of Naval Operations Ernest King. King told Marshall that the Navy was already considering plans to move against the same objectives, adding that these operations would be primarily naval, and should therefore be under the command of an admiral. MacArthur and his infantry, in the Navy plan, would follow up the Navy's initial amphibious assaults by garrisoning the islands the Navy seized, thus freeing up Marines to move on to the next objective.

MacArthur wouldn't accept this. This proposed offensive would operate entirely within his region of responsibility, therefore he should lead it, but the Navy was not willing to put its valuable aircraft carriers under the command of a landlubber.

Marshall agreed with MacArthur, prompting an irritated Admiral King to tell him that the Navy was going to begin its offensive whether or not the Army was prepared to support it. MacArthur accused King and the Navy of scheming to assume command over the entire US Army.

Marshall saw that this debate was getting out of hand, so he invited King to a face-to-face meeting to thrash out their differences. Between the two of them, they worked out a plan for an offensive divided into three parts. Task One would be an assault on the island of Tulagi, which the Japanese were now using as a seaplane base. Task Two and Task Three would be assaults aimed at the Japanese outposts on northern New Guinea and Bougainville, and then at last the capture of Rabaul on New Britain.

The plan was approved by the newly organized Joint Chiefs of Staff on July 2, 1942. It was a ray of light during a dark time. The Allies were suffering tremendous losses to the German U-boat campaign in the Atlantic. In North Africa, Rommel was on the move again, and the British were retreating toward Alexandria, and the key Soviet city of Sevastopol, home to the Black Sea Fleet, was about to fall to the Wehrmacht after holding out for eight months. At that moment, it seemed plausible that Army Group South and Panzerarmee Afrika might soon link up somewhere in the Middle East.

Against this deluge of bad news in the European theater of war was the promise of an Allied offensive in the Pacific against Japan.

Chester Nimitz appointed Admiral Robert Ghormley the overall commander of Task One, the seizure of Tulagi. Tulagi is a very small island, but it had a sheltered harbor suitable for takeoffs and landings of seaplanes, and that was the use to which the Japanese intended to put the island. Tulagi is very close to the much larger Florida Island; that would have to be taken as well.

A few days later, Ghormley was in Melbourne to discuss the campaign with MacArthur, when the two of them received disturbing news from Nimitz. I should explain here that between the wars, the Australians created an intelligence network among Westerners living in Papua and the Solomon Islands. When war came, this network was extended. Hundreds of Australian and New Zealander military personnel were stationed on the islands and recruited many indigenous islanders. Known as coastwatchers, their role was simply to observe Japanese military moves in the region and report them to Australia.

The coastwatchers had already provided valuable information about Japanese air and naval movements in the region. It was they who tipped the Allies off to the pending invasion of Tulagi. Now they reported that the Japanese had gone beyond merely setting up a seaplane base on Tulagi. They had moved to the nearby island of Guadalcanal, the largest island in the Solomons, and were building a regular air field, a base suitable for the placement of land-based bombers, which could patrol the seas and threaten Allied ships moving through the waters between New Caledonia and Australia.

Nimitz forwarded this information to MacArthur and Ghormley and told them that the Allied invasion force should take Guadalcanal in addition to Tulagi and Florida Islands. Both the general and the admiral agreed their invasion force lacked the resources to take the much larger

Guadalcanal, in addition to the other two islands they had already been assigned. It would be better to wait and build up their strength further before attempting this mission.

The Joint Chiefs dismissed their concerns. The Allies had the momentum following the Japanese defeat at Midway and they mustn't fritter it away. Ghormley and MacArthur were ordered to proceed with the plan.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Markus and Lukas for their kind donations, and thank you to Dawn-Carole for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Markus and Lukas and Dawn-Carole help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as Admiral Yamamoto gets his wish at last. Midway, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. If you look at a map of the island of New Guinea, you will note that the Japanese-controlled town of Lae and the Australian-controlled town of Port Moresby are only about 200 miles apart, or 320 kilometers, as the crow flies, and yes, they have crows on New Guinea.

The difficulty lies in the fact that you have to cross the island to get from Lae to Port Moresby, which would take you through some of the harshest terrain in the world. Between the two coasts runs the Owen Stanley Range, mountains that are tall, steep, covered with tropical forest, and all but impassable.

Not that the Japanese didn't try. After their failure to land at Port Moresby by sea, Japanese soldiers advanced inland from Lae. At the end of July, they reached the village of Kokoda in the northern foothills of the Owen Stanley Range, where there was a rubber plantation, an airstrip, and a small Australian force, whom the Japanese defeated and drove into the mountains.

From Kokoda ran a narrow, single-file trail all the way south to Port Moresby. Known as the Kokoda Track, it was one of the few places where it was possible to cross the mountains. For the

next two months, the Japanese pushed back a smaller and less-well equipped force of Australian defenders. The Japanese had superior numbers and weapons and tactics, but the retreating Australians put up a dogged defense. Both sides made use of pack animals and porters to carry supplies, and the Australians attempted supply by air when possible.

The Japanese badly underestimated the difficulty of traversing the Kokoda Track. They carried 16 days of rations for a campaign that took 45 days. By late September, the Japanese had come within sight of Port Moresby, but by that time their supply situation was desperate, and Japanese losses in the Solomon Islands campaign forced an order to withdraw. The campaign had been touch and go, but the Australians were able to hold the Japanese at bay long enough to force their withdrawal. By November, the Australians had retaken the village of Kokoda.

The fighting along the Kokoda Track has been called Australia's Thermopylae, comparable to the legendary battle in which a small Greek force held off a much larger force of Persian invaders, forcing a crucial delay in the enemy's plan.

It was also a valuable learning experience for the Australian Army and its American allies, pointing the way to better training and tactics for light infantry combat in jungle environments, including crucially, better procedures for supply and medical care for the wounded.

For the first time, Australian soldiers had fought against an enemy that directly threatened their homeland, and for that reason this campaign has become an important part of Australian military history, and even Australian national identity. It led to the creation of military units dedicated to jungle warfare, the beginning of a set of uniquely Australian military training and traditions.

[music: Closing War Theme]