

# LEXINGTON'S FINAL FIGHT

THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA WAS THE FIRST NAVAL ENGAGEMENT  
IN WHERE THE COMBATANTS DID NOT SEE EACH OTHER NOR EXCHANGE GUNFIRE

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By April 1942, US Navy intelligence was aware of the intentions of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) to establish itself at Port Moresby (Operation MO to the Japanese) in eastern New Guinea and at Tulagi, near Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. The purpose was to interdict the flow of men, equipment, and supplies from America to Australia. To prevent the capture of Port Moresby and to damage the seaplane base the Japanese were building at the abandoned Australian base on Tulagi, Task Force 11 (TF-11) R/Adm.

Aubrey W. Fitch, commanding; Task Force 17 R/Adm. Frank Jack Fletcher, commanding; and the ANZAC Task Force 44 (re-designated Task Group 17.3 [TG-17.3], which was the Support Group) R/Adm. John G. Crace, Royal Navy, commanding, were sent to the Coral Sea.

Task Force 11 was organized around the carrier USS *Lexington* (CV-2) and included two cruisers *Minneapolis* (CA-36) and *New Orleans* (CA-32); in addition to five destroyers.

Task Force 17 was organized around the carrier USS *Yorktown* (CV-5) and included cruisers *Astoria*, *Chester*, and *Portland*, plus four destroyers. Task Group 17.3 in support of TF-17 had no aircraft carrier and consisted of a mixed Allied force of cruisers *Australia II*, *Hobart* and *Chicago*, and two destroyers. There were also three fleet oilers with fuel for all: *Neosho*, *Tippecanoe*, and *Platte* — each accompanied by a destroyer. Fletcher was in overall command although

constantly subject to the orders of Adm. Ernest J. King, CinC-CNO in Washington, DC, and Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, CinC-Pac, in Hawaii.

The Battle of the Coral Sea opened on 4 May 1942 as *Yorktown's* Air Group attacked the Japanese Tulagi Invasion Force, R/Adm. Shima Kiyohide commanding, at Tulagi. Elements of the Japanese 3rd *Kure* Special Landing Force had gone ashore there (as well as on neighboring Gavutu) between 29 April and 2 May to establish defenses.

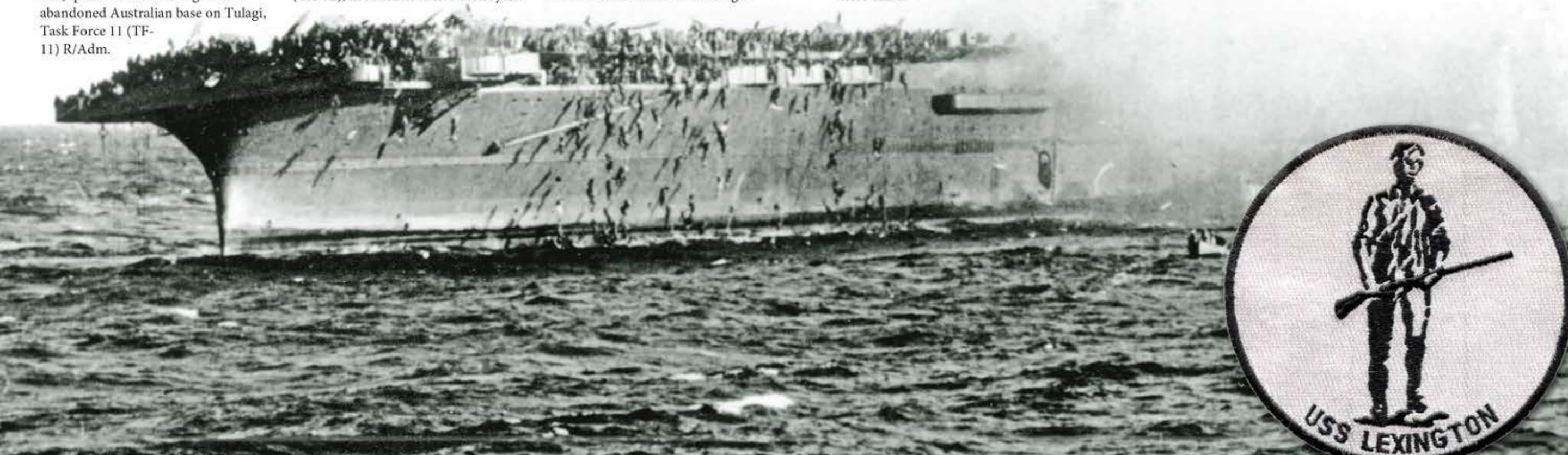
Approximately 100 miles south of Guadalcanal, 4 May dawned with overcast skies and rain showers with winds gusting up to 30 knots. Douglas SBD Dauntless and Douglas TBD Devastator aircraft (VB-5, VS-5, VT-5; Bombing, Scouting and Torpedo Squadrons of the *Yorktown*), supported by Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters (VF-42), temporarily assigned to the *Yorktown*, carried out strikes against the Japanese ships of the Tulagi invasion force. As they crossed the soon-to-be infamous island, they passed through the cold front with its unsettled weather and broke into clear skies.



The launching of the USS *Lexington*.

The attacking US Navy aircraft were unopposed except for an enemy seaplane, which was promptly shot down. During the day, three separate

strikes were carried out. Despite difficulties with torpedoes and the nimbleness of relatively small Japanese ships, the destroyer *Kikuzuki*, the minesweeper *Tama Maru*, and the auxiliary minesweepers *Wa 1* and *Wa 2* were sunk. Damaged were the destroyer *Yuzuki*,



Avoiding the flames and explosions consuming the aft portion of the carrier, the *Lexington's* crew abandons ship.



Jacket patch for USS *Lexington*.