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SER 034372 OF 13*

ACTION REPORT

COMMANDER TASK FORCE 17

SERIAL 0010N

27 MAY 1942

THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA MAY 4-8 1942

THE MAIN REPORT ON BATTLE THAT TURNED
BACK JAPANESE AMPHIBIOUS ATTACK ON
PORT MORESBY CONSISTING OF 3 PHASES

- 1 STRIKE BY YORKTOWN & SCREEN ON JAP
SHIPPING AT TULAGI ON 4 MAY 1942
- 2 AIR ATTACK ON JAP FORCE NE OF MISIMA
ISLAND ON 7 MAY RESULTING IN SINKING OF
CVL SHOHO
- 3 CARRIER DUEL SE OF ROSSEL ISLAND AND IN
CORAL SEA ON 8 MAY RESULTING IN DAMAGE TO
SHOKAKU YORKTOWN AND SINKING OF LEXINGTON

41078

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dated 27 May 1942

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DATE: 13 DEC 48 (SER 037372)

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May 27, 1942.

From: Commander Task Force SEVENTEEN
(Commander Cruisers, Pacific Fleet).
To : The Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Fleet.
Via : The Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Subject: The Battle of the Coral Sea, May 4 - 8, 1942.

Enclosure: (A) Reports of Group, Unit, and Ship Commanders.
(B) ComTaskFor 17 Secret Operation Order No. 2-42 of May 1, 1942.
? - (C) General Track Chart covering operations May 4 - 8, 1942.
? - (D) Track Chart covering action May 8, 1942. } not used 6/27/42

1. Enclosure (A) contains the details of the attacks on enemy forces at Tulagi, Florida Island, May 4 and north of Misima Island May 7; the attacks on United States and Japanese forces southeast of Rossel Island May 8; also various minor air contacts and engagements.

2. Enclosure (C) shows the operations of Task Force 17 for the period covered by this report. Enclosure (D) is a larger scale track for May 8, the only period that this force was under fire.

3. All times prior 1700, May 7 are minus 11½; thereafter, minus 11.

4. The Battle of the Coral Sea, as considered herein, consists of four distinct though related actions; (1) the attack on enemy forces at Tulagi May 4, (2) the attack on enemy forces north of Misima May 7, (3) air attack on Task Force 17 south of Rossel Island May 7, and (4) the exchange of attacks southeast of Rossel Island May 8. Between these actions, several contacts were made between Task Force 17 and enemy aircraft.

Events Leading up to the Action at Tulagi.

5. Task Force 17, YORKTOWN, ASTORIA, PORTLAND, CHESTER, MORRIS, ANDERSON, HAMMANN, RUSSELL, SIMS, WALKER with NEOSHO were returning to the Coral Sea after seven days upkeep and provisioning at Tongatabu when contact was made with Task Force 11 (Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, U.S.N.), LEXINGTON, MINNEAPOLIS, NEW ORLEANS, PHELPS, AYLWIN, MONAGHAN, WORDEN, DEWEY and FARRAGUT in latitude 16-16 S., longitude 162-20 E. at 0615, May 1, in accordance with previous arrangements. Task Force 11 was directed to join CHICAGO,

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5. Continued.

PERKINS and TIPPECANOE in latitude 16-00 S., longitude 161-45 E. and with those ships rejoin Task Force 17 next morning, which they did. It was desirable to take as much fuel as possible out of TIPPECANOE before sending her to Efate in accordance with orders of Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and to hold as much fuel in NEOSHO as practicable as a reserve. Intelligence reports indicated that the long awaited and expected Japanese advance toward Port Moresby might start very soon. Task Force 17 completed fueling on May 2, but I was disappointed to receive a report that Task Force 11 did not expect to complete fueling until noon of the fourth. Believing that reports of enemy forces precluded remaining so far to the southeastward, I directed Commander Task Force 11 to fuel his destroyers, if practicable, on northwesterly course at night and rejoin Task Force 17 at daylight May 4 in latitude 15-00 S., longitude 157-00 E. This was the same rendezvous as had been arranged with Rear Admiral Grace, Royal Navy, with AUSTRALIA and HOBART.

6. At 1545, May 2, a YORKTOWN air scout sighted an enemy submarine on the surface in latitude 16-04 S., longitude 162-18 E., just 32 miles north of Task Forces 11 and 17. Submarine dove but surfaced shortly afterward as it was again sighted and depth charged by three planes sent out to locate it. From sketches made by pilots of the bombers, it is difficult to understand how the submarine could have escaped. However, no visible results were noted and no contact was made by two destroyers which subsequently searched the area. The proximity of the submarine to our surface forces and radio interceptions pointed to the probability of our position having been reported to the enemy. In over two months of operating in the Coral Sea, this was the first definite indication of our presence having become known to the enemy.

7. Task Force 17 with NEOSHO continued to the northwestward during the night and topped off destroyers from NEOSHO on the third. It was intended to top off other ships requiring it after effecting rendezvous with Rear Admirals Fitch and Grace the next morning. The former had been directed to send TIPPECANOE to Efate, with destroyer escort, after fueling his force. Task Force 17 consistently kept in readiness for action on short notice by topping off destroyers from tankers, cruisers, or carrier whenever they could receive as much as five hundred barrels of fuel. This condition of readiness paid dividends on the nights of May 3 and 6.

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8. At 1900, May 3, received intelligence reports from Commander Southwest Pacific Forces stating that five or six vessels had been sighted at 1700, May 2, off the southern end of Santa Isabel Island possibly headed for Tulagi and that two transports were unloading into barges at Tulagi at an unspecified time. This was just the kind of report we had been waiting two months to receive. It was regrettable that the entire force was not present and ready to proceed but fortunate that a sufficiently strong force, fully fueled, was in a position to strike at daylight. NEOSHO with RUSSELL as escort was directed to proceed to latitude 15-00 S., longitude 157-00 E. to meet Rear Admirals Fitch and Grace at 0800, May 4 and the combined force was then to proceed eastward and join Task Force 17 in latitude 15-00 S., longitude 160-00 E. at daylight, May 5.

The Action at Tulagi.

9. At 2030 YORKTOWN, ASTORIA, PORTLAND, CHESTER, CHICAGO, MORRIS, ANDERSON, HAMMANN, SIMS, WALKER, PERKINS changed course to north and speed to 24 knots and two hours later to 27 knots. At 0701, May 4, YORKTOWN launched a six plane combat air patrol and the first attack group. Combat air patrol was maintained throughout the day and cruisers maintained inner air patrol. The surface force maneuvered, as shown on track chart, south of Guadalcanal Island. Three air attacks were made as shown in YORKTOWN's report. Only four fighters were launched for protection of attack groups as there was practically no air opposition. No enemy ships or aircraft were sighted from our ships. The last attack group was landed at 1702.

10. Our losses for the day were one torpedo plane and two fighters which failed to return due to becoming lost and running out of gasoline. The fighter pilots were recovered from Guadalcanal Island by HAMMANN in same evening. Information subsequently received from Commander Southwest Pacific Forces indicates that the torpedo plane crew reached Guadalcanal Island but information as to their final rescue from that place is lacking. Six scout bombers and two torpedo planes were slightly damaged.

11. Enemy losses reported by returning aircraft: Two destroyers, one cargo ship, four gunboats sunk; one light cruiser beached and sunk; one destroyer, one heavy cruiser or aircraft tender (conflicting statements make it impossible to identify) severely damaged; one cargo ship damaged; various small craft destroyed; five single float seaplanes shot down. Subsequent intelligence reports from Commander Southwest Pacific Forces quote coast watcher on Guadalcanal Island as stating that nine vessels were

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11. Continued.

definitely sunk at Tulagi, including three cruisers (one beached), three destroyers, and three transports. From the three transports sunk off Savo Island (near Tulagi) only two survivors were seen by natives.

Events Between Tulagi and Misima.

12. During the night of May 4 - 5, this force less PERKINS and HAMMANN proceeded southeast and south at 23 knots to rendezvous as previously arranged. PERKINS searched unsuccessfully for crew of lost torpedo plane and HAMMANN recovered pilots from two fighters which landed on Guadalcanal Island. These two ships rejoined next morning.

13. At 0825, May 5, YORKTOWN launched four fighters to investigate radar contact on aircraft bearing 252°, distance 30 miles. Interception was completed at 0840 and enemy patrol plane shot down. At this time the patrol plane was fifteen miles from LEXINGTON and twenty-seven miles from YORKTOWN, suggesting the possibility that it may have been trailing Task Force 11 and not Task Force 17. Shortly before rejoining, HAMMANN sighted the patrol plane. At 0846 rendezvous was effected with Task Forces 11 and 44 (Rear Admiral Grace). YORKTOWN air scout reported enemy submarine on the surface at 0808, bearing 285°, distance 150 miles, course 105. As this course was the reverse of his bearing, it is probable that patrol plane had been directing him toward Task Force 11 or 17. Three torpedo planes from YORKTOWN made an unsuccessful search for submarine.

14. Task Force 17 fueled from NEOSHO May 5 and 6 and combined with Task Forces 11 and 44 as Task Force 17. Enclosure (B) was placed in effect at 0730, May 6. The force was organized with an attack group of cruisers and destroyers for the purpose of making night and day attacks on enemy surface craft and a support group of cruisers and destroyers to protect the carriers. Either of these groups might be assigned the mission of the other, depending on the strength of the force to be attacked or they might be combined for an attack if the four destroyers assigned the carrier group were considered sufficient protection.

15. Intelligence reports from Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Commander Southwest Pacific Forces, on the fifth and sixth, placed a large number of enemy ships in the area between New Guinea, New Britain, and Solomon Islands. Practically every type of ship was reported and it was fairly definitely established

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15. Continued.

that three aircraft carriers were in the area. The forces were scattered and there was no common direction of movement. Courses reported varied from 100 clockwise to 342. A battleship and a carrier in latitude 8-30 S., longitude 154-25 E. at 1045, May 5, were reported hove to or moving slowly north. By the afternoon of the sixth, it was becoming evident that the advance would be against Port Moresby through Jomard Passage and that a base was to be established in the Deboyne Islands. Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet had given May 7 or 8 as the date on which the enemy advance might be expected. The sea and wind had made it necessary to fuel on a southeasterly course, so it was decided to discontinue fueling in order to proceed to the northwestward and be within striking distance of probable enemy positions by daylight May 7. NEOSHO with SIMS as escort was detached to operate to the southward in accordance with enclosure (B). Radar contacts and one visual contact on unidentified aircraft were made on the sixth but none resulted in fighter interception. It is probable, however, that this force was sighted and our position reported.

Action off Misima, May 7.

16. At daylight the seventh, Rear Admiral Grace with Task Group 17.3 plus FARRAGUT was detached to proceed ahead and destroy enemy transports and light cruisers reported to be headed toward Jomard Passage the preceeding night. At 1556 a despatch was received stating that this group had been bombed by eight twin engined torpedo bombers and nineteen light bombers. Three planes were shot down. Ships were not damaged.

17. Morning air search was planned to locate the most suitable objective for attack and to obtain positive or negative information regarding enemy carriers of whose movements no information had been received since the previous afternoon. It was quite possible that three enemy carriers might be within striking distance. Unfortunately, the search to the east northeastward was not completed due to bad weather. A scout searching to the northwestward reported two carriers and four cruisers north of Misima Island. After launching the attack groups, the scouts were recovered and it was learned that an error had been made in using the contact pad and that pilot had not sighted any carriers. About the time this error was discovered, Army aircraft reported a carrier group close to Misima and the attack groups were diverted and made contact. The carrier and a light cruiser were sunk in latitude 10-29 S., longitude 152-53 E. The large number of torpedo and bomb hits and the rapidity of her sinking (within about five minutes) must have resulted in the loss of practically all

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personnel and planes aboard the carrier. The light cruiser was reported to sink so quickly that there must have been great loss of life in her also. From photographs and intelligence reports the carrier is believed to have been RYUKAKU. The cruiser was unidentified. The attack groups returned at 1338.

18. The advisability of sending in another attack or launching a search was considered. The probability of finding a suitable objective near the scene of the morning attack was not great. The location of Carrier Division FIVE (SHOKAKU and ZUIKAKU) was unknown though quite possibly might be within striking distance. Radar contacts and radio interceptions indicated that our position and disposition were known to the enemy. One four engine patrol bomber had been intercepted and shot down by YORKTOWN fighters. In as much as enemy carriers were probably in the vicinity, it was not believed that any other objective should be considered for our air striking force which should be held in readiness for a counter attack. There probably would have been insufficient daylight for an attack following an extensive search. Flying conditions and visibility were becoming increasingly bad and frequent rain squalls were encountered. It was, therefore, decided to rely upon shore based aircraft to locate enemy carriers.

19. During the afternoon an estimate of the situation led to the decision to head westward during the night, it being expected that the enemy would pass through Jomard Passage by morning headed for Port Moresby, in force, probably accompanied by carrier. The situation was altered by the sighting of enemy planes just before and after dark. At 1659 an enemy seaplane was sighted but fighters failed to intercept. Clocks were set to minus 11 zone time at 1700. At 1747 radar showed a group of planes to the southeastward on a westerly course. Interception was completed and our fighters completely broke up the enemy attack resulting in the loss through destruction or failure to return to own carrier of between fifteen and twenty enemy planes. Our losses were three fighters, one of which may have landed on Tagula Island. While our planes were landing after dark, three enemy planes circled the disposition showing lights and made no sign of hostility. They were believed to be lost having mistaken our force for their own. One of these enemy planes was reported shot down by ship gun fire. It was realized that carriers were in our vicinity but their location was indefinite. Radio interception on the homing of these lost planes indicated the probability of enemy carriers being about 140 miles either east or west. At 2200 received a message from Commander Air that LEXINGTON

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19. Continued.

radar plot had indicated enemy carrier or carriers about thirty miles bearing 090° at 1930. YORKTOWN radar had given no indications, except a single plane which was circling at 25 to 30 miles on bearing 060° and later was tracked on course 310 and was believed to be one of YORKTOWN's missing fighters. Assuming that LEXINGTON's analysis was correct for 1930, the location of the enemy three hours later would have been very doubtful. Under these circumstances, it was considered inadvisable to detach cruisers and destroyers or even destroyers alone. Some destroyers had to be retained for submarine protection. There was the further possibility that the attack force might not rejoin by daylight, when their protection would be valuable to our carriers. Had there been any assurance of our surface force making contact, it might have been advisable for the carriers to retire to the southward. But had the surface force failed to make contact during the night, they might have met a disastrous air attack next day. All things considered, the best plan seemed to be to keep our force concentrated and prepare for a battle with enemy carriers next morning.

20. At 1051, May 7, a despatch, repeated several times, was received from NEOSHO reporting that she was being bombed by three aircraft in latitude 16-50 S., longitude 159-08 E. Later, at 1600, the NEOSHO reported that she was sinking in latitude 16-38 S., longitude 158-28 E. A subsequent despatch from Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet indicated that SIMS had also been sunk. Unfortunately, nothing was received as to the type of aircraft which attacked them. It would have been extremely valuable information if it had been reported that they were carrier planes. MONAGHAN was detached during the night May 7-8 to search next morning for survivors and to send radio despatches to Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and others. This left seven destroyers and five cruisers with our two carriers.

Action Southeast of Rossel Island, May 8.

21. As our shore based aircraft had not sighted SHOKAKU and ZUIKAKU on the seventh and our radio intelligence had indicated that they might be either east or west of us, it was necessary to launch a 360 degree search at dawn. At 0828 LEXINGTON scout reported two carriers, four heavy cruisers, three destroyers. This was amplified at 0835 as two carriers, four heavy cruisers and many destroyers 120 miles, bearing 006° from reference point Zed. LEXINGTON signalled that true bearing of enemy was 028°, distant 175 miles from own force.

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21. Continued.

This placed him in latitude 11-51 S., longitude 156-04 E. An intercepted radio transmission indicated that we had been sighted at 0822. At 0900 attack groups were launched. Cruisers and destroyers were in a circular screen surrounding the two carriers, axis 305. To avoid having all ships moving to new positions at a time when an air attack might develop, the axis was not changed and YORKTOWN was told to adjust position as necessary to avoid having the two carriers in line with the sun. Throughout the day, the manner in which ships were maneuvered without signal is remarkable. In order to reduce signalling between carriers and to allow him complete freedom of action for his carriers and air groups, Commander Air (Rear Admiral Fitch, U.S.N.) was given tactical command at 0907.

22. At 1000 a radio despatch was sent to Commander Southwest Pacific Forces giving the enemy's disposition and 0900 position in the hope of shore based aircraft being available to bomb and track him. Our own position was also included.

23. Two radar contacts resulted in no interception and one visual contact resulted in the destruction of a four engine patrol bomber. At 1055 radar indicated a large group of enemy aircraft bearing 020°, distant 68 miles. These planes came in on a steady bearing and it is considered that they should have been intercepted earlier than they were and also more effectively. It would appear that the advantage which we possess with our radar and fighter director system was not exploited to the fullest extent.

24. Our first attack group reached the enemy about twenty minutes before his aircraft attacked our ships. The YORKTOWN group arrived at the objective ahead of the LEXINGTON group but radio intercept logs would indicate almost simultaneous attacks. The YORKTOWN bombers and torpedo planes made a coordinated attack upon the enemy carrier to the northward and reported having made six one thousand pound bomb hits and three sure, possibly four, torpedo hits. When leaving the enemy carrier was ablaze forward and obviously severely damaged. The LEXINGTON group reported making three one thousand pound bomb hits and five torpedo hits on an enemy carrier of the SHOKAKU class. When last seen she was on fire, settling, and turning in a circle. Although the Task Force Commander was unaware at the time and did not so report, an analysis of the reports of the commanding officers of our carriers indicates that our groups attacked separate enemy carriers and severely damaged both.

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25. During the air attack on our force, the two carriers separated due to their radical maneuvers at high speeds. Without signal those ships nearest each carrier formed a screen around each. The anti-aircraft fire was better than had been expected and shot down at least seventeen enemy planes. The screening ships also provided worth while protection by making the approach more difficult for enemy torpedo planes.

26. After all aircraft had either returned or hope for them had been given up, an informal estimate of the situation was made. Consideration was given to making another air attack or sending in the Attack Group for a surface attack. A returning LEXINGTON pilot had reported that one enemy carrier was undamaged. At 1422 Commander Air reported that there were strong indications that an additional carrier had joined enemy forces and this information was passed on to Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Commander Southwest Pacific Forces. Three YORKTOWN boilers, which had been out of commission, were placed in use again and she was capable of making 30 knots. Damage had reduced LEXINGTON's maximum speed to 24 knots. Radio interceptions indicated that at least some of the planes from SHOKAKU had been landed aboard ZUIKAKU. The idea of making another air attack was rejected because YORKTOWN had only 8 fighters, 12 bombers and 8 torpedo planes (7 torpedoes) serviceable. The idea of making a surface attack was also rejected due to the probability of our ships being detected and subjected to a strong carrier air attack before dark. It was decided to retire to the southward for further investigation of damage to ships and to get aircraft in condition to renew our air attack next day. At 1510, I reassumed tactical command. It was intended to take LEXINGTON's serviceable planes aboard YORKTOWN and start LEXINGTON on her way back to Pearl Harbor. Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet was so informed. It is believed that the decision not to renew the attack on the eighth, although probably based on incorrect information, resulted in saving the lives of 92 percent of LEXINGTON's personnel, a large portion of which would have been lost if the Attack Group had not been present when the ship sank.

27. At 1445 LEXINGTON reported she had had a serious explosion and at 1452 that fires were not under control. At 1502 Commander Task Force 17 advised Commander Southwest Pacific Forces that LEXINGTON's condition was much worse and requested air coverage. At 1610 LEXINGTON reported abandoning lower deck spaces and at 1657 that all power was lost. At 1710 LEXINGTON started abandoning ship.

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Rear Admiral Kinkaid was directed to take charge of the rescue operations. He and the officers and men of MINNEAPOLIS, NEW ORLEANS, PHELPS, MORRIS, ANDERSON and HAMMANN displayed superb seamanship and perseverance in the rescue of over 2700 survivors. The account of the last hours of LEXINGTON is vividly related in the statements of her Captain and Executive Officer. She was finally sunk with torpedoes by PHELPS in latitude 15-05 S., longitude 155-16 E.

28. Summary of Estimated Enemy Losses and Damage, May 4 - 8.
(T) at Tulagi, (M) off Misima, (C) Coral Sea.

<u>Ships sunk</u>	<u>Personnel</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Date</u>
Two destroyers	200	(T)	May 4
Three cargo ships or transports	900	(T)	May 4
Four gunboats	200	(T)	May 4
One light cruiser beached	50	(T)	May 4
One carrier - RYUKAKU	2000	(M)	May 7
One light cruiser	600	(M)	May 7
Various small craft	50	(T)	May 4

Ships severely damaged

One destroyer	50	(T)	May 4
One heavy cruiser or aircraft tender	200	(T)	May 4
One carrier - SHOKAKU	500	(C)	May 8

Ships damaged

One carrier - ZUIKAKU	200	(C)	May 8
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Aircraft destroyed

Three torpedo bombers or light bombers by Task Group 17.3 off Moresby	12	(C)	May 7
Five seaplanes	10	(T)	May 4
Three 4-engine patrol bombers	24	(C)	May 5, 7, 8
Seven fighters	7	(M)	May 7
Three torpedo bombers	6	(M)	May 7
Six fighters	6	(C)	May 7
Two dive bombers	4	(M)	May 7
Nine dive bombers	18	(C)	May 7
Forty aircraft (est.) aboard RYUKAKU	-	(M)	May 7
Thirty fighters	30	(C)	May 8

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<u>Aircraft destroyed (continued)</u>	<u>Personnel</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Date</u>
Five dive bombers	10	(C)	May 8
Eleven torpedo	22	(C)	May 8
Twenty aircraft (est.) aboard SHOKAKU and ZUIKAKU	- -	(C)	May 8

Total planes 144
Estimated total personnel 5099

29. Summary of Our Losses and Damage, May 4 - 8.
(T) at Tulagi, (M) off Misima, (C) Coral Sea.

<u>Ships sunk</u>	<u>Personnel</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Date</u>
One carrier	238	(C)	May 8
One destroyer)	200	(C)	May 7
One tanker }			

Ships damaged

One carrier	60	(C)	May 8
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Aircraft destroyed

Fifteen LEXINGTON planes in combat;	23	(M)(C)	May 7, 8
Thirty-five LEXINGTON planes with ship	- -	(C)	May 8
Sixteen YORKTOWN planes in combat	22	(T)(M)(C)	May 4, 7, 8

Total planes 66
Estimated total personnel 543

Damaged aircraft are not included for either side as they probably balanced and there is probability of overlapping.

30. It is a notable fact that at Tulagi and Misima, as at other attacks in which Task Force 17 has participated in the Marshalls and at Salamoa - Lae, the Japanese forces were completely surprised and caught off guard. This would seem to indicate that their reputation for efficiency and alertness is not entirely justified.

A16-3/(0010N)

UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET
CRUISERS, PACIFIC FLEET

(Boo)

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May 27, 1942.

Subject: The Battle of the Coral Sea, May 4 - 8, 1942.

31. Reports from Commander Attack Group and Commander Support Group will be forwarded as soon as received. At a later date I shall submit comments and recommendations with respect to the recommendations contained in the reports of subordinate commanders of Task Force 17.


FRANK JACK FLETCHER.