



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – 69th Commemoration of the Battle of the Coral Sea

**Remarks of Ambassador Bleich
Remembering the Battle of the Coral Sea
at the Australian-American Memorial
in Russell, ACT**

(As prepared for delivery – May 5, 2011)

It is an honor to be with you here today to pay tribute to those who fought in the battle of the Coral Sea.

In the haste of our busy lives, it is easy to forget what came before us. Not that long ago – in less than the span of a human lifetime – Australia was on the verge of being invaded. Today, it is difficult to imagine how close we came to full-scale war on this land. But then, the threat of invasion and conquest were very real. It was only the actions and the faith of the people of that generation that made the difference between being subjects of Japan, or enjoying that the great freedoms that we so easily take for granted. It is a tribute to everyone here today that you've taken that moment to reflect -- to remember those who came and sacrificed before us, and to remember a battle that changed the course of history.

The Battle of the Coral Sea took place during some of the darkest days of World War II. U.S. and Australian naval forces had not recovered from the crippling attack on Pearl Harbor just six months earlier and the attacks on Darwin just three months later. Our depleted forces had not had a single victory. Indeed, the Japanese had won an unbroken series of battles, conquering most of the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Gilbert Islands, and Guam. And now they were set to take Port Moresby and – from there – lay claim to Australia. Our Allies were depleted as well; with London now suffering its second year of relentless bombing attacks. In those hours in early May 1942, many wondered if Japanese expansion could ever be stopped. At this darkest hour, we needed a victory and the world needed hope. Sixty-Nine years ago this week, at the Battle of the Coral Sea, a group of Australian and American young men gave the free world something to believe in.

We remember them today – those who lived and those who perished. Many of them were barely adults – 18 and 19 year old boys. We have to imagine their feelings: standing on the deck of the U.S.S. Lexington or the HMAS Australia, in the middle of a vast ocean, knowing that their lives could very well end that day, knowing that out there somewhere were enemy destroyers, gunboats, and carrier aircraft preparing to bear down



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on them and take away everything that they had in this world. Their eyes scanning the skies, their mouths dry, their ears throbbing; and then suddenly the sky is filled with aircraft, and they hear those first horrifying shrieks of metal and fragments.

There is nowhere to go or to hide; they are exposed in the midst of an ocean. Yet, despite the unspeakable fear, they maintain their stations and they fight. They fight with the strength of knowing that they may have only minutes to live. And in that dark and terrible knowledge they respond with faith: a faith that their life – no matter how brief -- would be greater if they devote what was left to making the world safer and freer for others. It is that great spirit, that great faith, that we commemorate today.

Those 656 men who gave their lives in the Battle, and those who survived, changed the course of the war. Heroic campaigns were still to come at Kokoda, Iwo Jima, Midway, Guadalcanal, and many other places. But the Coral Sea was a turning point. It showed the world that our enemies were not invincible; they could and would be defeated. Even more importantly, it showed the world that no matter how bleak the situation, Americans and Australians stood together and would not lose faith. Adversity only strengthened our resolve and drew us closer together.

The Battle of the Coral Sea served notice to the world and gave free people inspiration.

The legacy of this effort goes beyond defeat of an enemy; it has helped to define the world that came after them. General George Marshall said that the true measure of success in any battle is the peace that follows. The men who fought in this battle reflected a spirit that has brought the most profound type peace: where our people formed eternal bonds of friendship; where our nations re-dedicated ourselves to the values of freedom and democracy; and where as victors we approached all of the world – even our former adversaries – with good will and generosity.

70 years ago, Australian and American servicemembers gathered on lonely airfields in the middle of the night to dispatch cargo planes to Japan loaded with arms and supplies to fight a war with our enemy. Last month, Australian and American servicemembers gathered again on a lonely airfield in the middle of the night to dispatch cargo planes to Japan loaded with aid and equipment to help our friends the Japanese after a tsunami. That is progress. That is peace. And that is the lasting legacy of men who fought in the Coral Sea.

May they never be forgotten.

It is now my honor to read for you the Presidential Message commemorating this anniversary;