



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Declaration of U.S. Warships

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**Remarks of Ambassador Bleich  
at the Declaration of U.S. Warships – the USS Lexington, USS  
Sims, and USS Neosho – sunk during the Battle of the Coral  
Sea, as protected historic shipwrecks, Melbourne  
“Building Civil Societies”**

*(As prepared for delivery – May 7, 2012)*

Thank you Minister Burke. I am grateful not only for your inspiring words, but also for your leadership that has brought us here today. This historic designation today simply would not have happened without your leadership and persistence.

It is an honor to be with you all. I am particularly honored and moved to be in the presence of a special group of Australian and United States Coral Sea veterans. Mr. Gordon Johnson, his wife Fleur, and Mr Derek Holyoake from Australia. And from the United States, Mr. Harry Frey, Mr. Cecil Wiswell, and Mrs. Ruth Grizzell, widow of Jim Grizzell.

Thank you for making the journey to be with us today. Though time has a way of changing our skin or our hair, it does not change our spirit when we live by our ideals. You remain as vital to our nations today as you were when served as young men and women. Harry Frey the hero and veteran is the same Harry who stopped and made sure to liberate the Lexington's ice cream supply when the order came to abandon ship. Leave no man, or ice cream, behind.

Thank you also to my diplomatic colleague Ambassador Charles Lepani, Papua New Guinea's High Commissioner to Australia, and soon to be PNG's Ambassador to the United States.

I offer a special welcome to the Minister for Defense, Stephen Smith, and to the Minister for Veterans Affairs, Warren Snowden. You have been true friends and leaders in our Alliance, and we are very honored that you joined us today.

And welcome to all of our other distinguished guests for joining us here today, for this historic designation.

Today we gather because of a time that now seems almost unimaginable – the darkest days of World War II, before the Battle of the Coral Sea. Looking across this beautiful,



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secure capital city, it is hard for those who were not there to believe the fear and tension of those moments. On this autumn day seventy years ago, the threat of an attack upon this Nation's capital was not only real; it was expected.

The security of Australia had never looked so bleak. 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 secured a single victory.

In fact, the Japanese Imperial Forces had won an unbroken series of battles, conquering the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, the Gilbert Islands, and Guam. And now they were set to take Port Moresby and – from there – lay claim to Australia.

At that dark hour, we desperately needed to stop Japan, and the world needed hope. Seventy years ago this week, at the Battle of the Coral Sea, our nations turned to a group of young Australian and American men – sailors like Gordon, Derek, Harry, Cecil, and their mates aboard the Lexington, the Hobart, the Sims, the Neosho and their sister ships. We looked to these young men – and we asked them to put their lives on the line, to give the free world something to believe in; to give the world hope.

We remember them today – those who lived and those who perished. Many of them were barely adults – 18 and 19 year old boys -- guys who loved ice cream; blokes nervous about their first dance. We have to imagine their feelings: standing on the deck of the USS Lexington or the Sims or the Neosho, in the middle of a vast ocean, waiting. Knowing that out there somewhere were enemy destroyers, gunboats, and carrier aircraft preparing to bear down on them and take away everything that they had ever hoped for in this world; knowing that their lives could very well end that day. These men fought through that fear, they fought to save each other's lives, and they fought to save our nations. They did what no other fighting force had yet done in the Pacific – they turned back the Japanese Imperial forces.

The 656 men who gave their lives in the battle, and those who survived, changed the course of the war. Heroic campaigns were still to follow at Midway, Kokoda, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, 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. It demonstrated our unyielding character -- that no matter how bleak the situation, Americans and Australians would stand together for the nations we love.

It is that sacrifice and that achievement and that spirit, which we immortalize today.



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There are other monuments to this achievement. The towering War memorial here in Canberra rises above the City as a testament to their actions. But today's monument is personal. It preserves forever, for all future generations, the final resting places of the sailors who perished that day, and their ships – the USS Lexington, the USS Sims, and the USS Neosho.

For the men here today, we can never repay you for your sacrifice and that of your crewmates. We honor you instead in two ways. First, we hallow the ground of your fallen shipmates, and commit to forever remember and preserve your deeds. Second, we devote ourselves to their unfinished work. We rededicate ourselves to keeping this ocean safe, and prosperous, and tranquil. We rededicate ourselves to one another – two great nations bound together by one mighty ocean; bound together by a common purpose, and by great faith in one another.

On behalf of the President and the people of the United States of America, I thank Australia's government and the people of Australia for designating the USS Lexington, USS Sims, and USS Neosho as protected shipwrecks. We thank the people of Australia for their true and enduring friendship. Your act today stirs the gratitude of our nation. Just as you have not forgotten the service of our brave sailors, we will never forget this tribute.

We live in freedom today because of these men and this spirit.

May they never be forgotten.