Military and maritime history

remote, rare and remarkable

> "...In about a minute, the ship was carried amongst the breakers; and striking upon a coral head, took a fearful heel over..."

Matthew Flinders
A Voyage to Terra Australis, London, 1814

The Coral Sea was a maritime 'highway' in early Australian history. In the 17th and 18th centuries, voyages by European explorers criss-crossed the area, covering extraordinary distances in fragile sailing boats. By the 19th century, the Coral Sea was being explored for guano (phosphate) mining and offshore whaling.
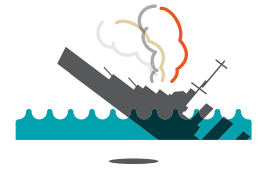
Did you know?

45 known shipwreck sites
are found in the Coral Sea Marine Park. Dozens more shipwrecks are reported in the historical record but their sites are yet to be located.

1600 members of the US and Japanese armed forces
were killed or wounded in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

3 US Navy ships
sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea lie up to 3 km underwater in what is now the Coral Sea Marine Park.

Image: USS *Lexington*, October 1941

Image: USN flight deck crew

Image: USS Sims, destroyer

Historic sites

a flotilla of ghost ships

On the night of 17 August 1803, Captain Matthew Flinders, navigator and cartographer and the first to circumnavigate the Australian continent, was returning to England as a passenger on HMS *Porpoise* when it, with the *Cato*, was wrecked on an uncharted reef in the south Coral Sea. Flinders survived, as did most of his hard-won charts and journals, but three people perished.

Coral Sea Marine Park

Accompanying the *Porpoise* and the *Cato* on the voyage was the East India Company's *Bridgewater*. When the vessels foundered, the Bridgewater made little attempt to rescue the crews and later reported the ships lost with no survivors. Flinders, with a select crew, sailed a small open boat 1000 km back to Sydney to get help for the remaining crew members, who were camped on a nearby cay. The survivors, including Flinders's brother Samuel, were rescued on 7 October 1803.

Today, the *Porpoise* and the *Cato* provide fascinating dive sites at the aptly named Wreck Reef.

World War II battleground

In World War II the Coral Sea was the setting for the first combined naval action by Australia and the United States, with HMAS *Australia* (a heavy cruiser) and HMAS *Hobart* (a light cruiser) joining major elements of the US Navy Pacific Fleet under the command of US Admiral Frank Fletcher.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was a pivotal series of naval engagements between the Allied and Japanese forces off the north-east coast of Australia between 4 and 8 May 1942. It was the first naval battle in which the opposing forces of surface ships neither sighted nor fired at each other.

All attacks were carried out by aircraft, some from land bases but mostly from aircraft carriers.

The battle was the first time the Japanese experienced failure in a major operation in the Pacific during World War II and it marked the limit of Japanese expansion. The Battle of the Coral Sea, and later naval losses in the Battle of Midway in the northern Pacific, forced them to abandon their plans for a seaborne invasion of Port Moresby.

Both the US and the Japanese lost vessels in the battle. Three US warships, USS *Lexington*, USS *Neosho* and USS *Sims*, were sunk in what is now the Coral Sea Marine Park. The sole Japanese ship to be sunk was IJN *Shoho* (a light aircraft carrier), south-east of what is now Papua New Guinea.

New voyages of discovery

Archaeologists from the National Maritime Museum and the Silentworld Foundation recently visited Kenn Reefs, a treacherous area for navigation in the Coral Sea, 520 km north-east of Bundaberg. They discovered three previously unknown shipwrecks, estimated to be at least 150 years old. These ships were probably trading vessels, wrecked on their way from Australia to Asia or as far away as Europe.

Image: USS Lexington crippled

Image: Shipwreck, Kenn Reef
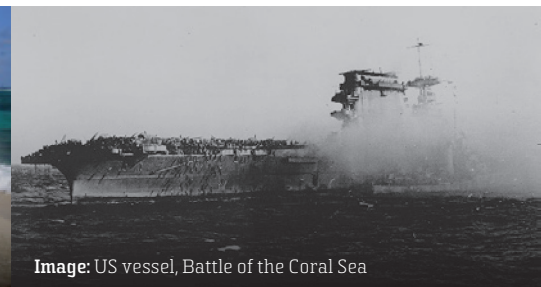**Photographer:** Regulus Fogagnolo, Parks Australia

Image: US vessel, Battle of the Coral Sea

Learn more

About the Coral Sea Marine Park: **parksaustralia.gov.au/coralsea**
About Australian shipwrecks: **environment.gov.au/heritage/ historic-shipwrecks/australian-national-shipwreck-database**
About visiting the Coral Sea: **tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au**

The Coral Sea Marine Park is managed by Parks Australia.

Australian Government
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Australian Marine Parks