

History and Heroism Remembered

Down Under

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Brisbane, Australia

As our small contingent of six men marched along the parade route we could hardly believe what we were seeing. Thousands of people lined the street on side. They were all clapping and cheering and holding up signs that read THANK YOU! The blue and white banner we carried bore the words, "USS Lexington CV-2 The Battle of the Coral Sea. As our group marched past, they grew even more enthusiastic. You would have thought we had just won the war and were taking part in a victory parade in our honor.

It was April 25, 2002 and this was ANZAC Day which is Australia's memorial day when they honor their war dead. ANZAC is an acronym which stands for Australia New Zealand Army Corps. It has been celebrated annually in both countries since 1916 when for the first time, Australia and New Zealand as independent nations, sent troops abroad in World War I to fight in battle of Gallipoli to open the way to the Black Sea for allied navies. Australia lost more than 8,000 men in this conflict. The first landing at Gallipoli took place on April 25, 1915, thus establishing the significance of this date in Australia's history. ANZAC Day is probably Australia's most important national occasion. And we had been invited to march in the parade.

Our small group consisted of just eight men, seven of whom were U.S. Navy veterans who were on board the aircraft carrier USS Lexington CV-2 and fought in the Battle of the Coral Sea on May 7 - 8, 1942. I was the eighth person. They ranged in age from seventy-eight years old to eighty-nine years old.

All of us had traveled from the United States to Australia to take part in two weeks of ceremonies and events commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Coral Sea battle. Five of these men were able to march in the parade. Two others rode in cars behind us because walking any distance had grown too difficult for them. At age sixty-five, I was the youngest of the group. At the time of the Coral Sea battle I was just five years old. I had been invited to join them on this trip because my father had fought at Coral Sea as a naval aviator and was killed in action on May 8, 1942. I went to Australia to honor his service and his sacrifice and that of others who were killed in the battle.

For more than a year I had been planning this trip anticipating that it would be a most memorable occasion. What transpired over the next two weeks far exceeded my Grandest expectations.

We had arrived in Australia on April 23rd. The next day our group was interviewed on camera by local radio and TV stations. Their coverage was broadcast later that same day. The following day, April 25th, while I was waiting to march in the ANZAC Day parade, several people came up to me saying they had seen me on TV. They thanked me for what the United States did for Australia in World War II. This happened to me and others in our group numerous times over the next two weeks. I could not believe the outpouring of gratitude and appreciation so warmly extended to us. The people of Australia have never forgotten that the United States came to their defense at a critical time early in World War II. To this day, they don't hesitate to thank us in the most genuine and gracious terms.

During the next two weeks our group officially known as the USS Lexington CV-2 Minutemen Club, attended five memorial services, several luncheons, a number of receptions in our

honor and a grand ball, all commemorating the Battle of the Coral Sea. On each occasion we were welcomed by our host and asked to stand and be recognized. We were always greeted by applause and expressions of appreciation. The Governor of the state of Queensland, His Excellency Major General Peter Arnison, hosted us at a morning tea at the Governor's mansion. Later that same week, The Lord Mayor of Brisbane welcomed us at an evening reception at City Hall in downtown Brisbane. This was an elegant affair where attractive hostesses circulated among the guests serving them drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Music was provided by the U.S. Navy Band from the Seventh Fleet.

For the entire thirteen days we were in Brisbane, transportation was provided for us. A local cab company supplied taxi service at no charge. In addition, a local Chrysler - Jeep dealer provided brand new mini vans and Jeeps SUV's to take us on special trips and to various events. Members of the local chapter of the Australian American Association and also the American Legion served as both our chauffeurs and hosts on numerous occasions.

One afternoon when I returned to our hotel, I was given a complimentary ticket to attend a concert that evening at the Queensland Performing Arts Center. The concert featured the Queensland Symphony Pops Orchestra and the theme was Celtic music. It was a stirring performance with a wonderful orchestra, a men's and women's chorus, Irish dancers, bagpipes, Irish tenor and baritone soloists, colorful costumes and more. The performing arts center itself could rival the Kennedy Center in Washington. Upon my return to the hotel, our bus load of concert goers were served tea, coffee and biscuits (cookies). What an evening!

The Coral Sea Battle Memorial Service in Brisbane took place at noon on May 4th and was held at Newstead Park by the Brisbane River. It was attended by many dignitaries including the governor of Queensland, high ranking military officers, World War II veterans of Australia and the United States, and members of numerous organizations with an interest in military matters and Australian history. Pageantry and military precision were the order of the day as an Australian Navy Honor Guard marched crisply to the Coral Sea Monument and took up their positions. Flags were lowered to half staff as a bugler sounded "Last Post." After a silent tribute, the bugler sounded Reveille and flags were raised. Several speakers delivered addresses. Prayers were said and wreaths were laid at the base of the monument in tribute to those who had been killed in the battle. The band played the national anthems of both Australia and the United States. It was an impressive and moving ceremony .

At one point an old Australian WW II Army veteran in full dress uniform complete with sword and the famous Aussie Digger hat, walked crisply over to our group seated along the front row of our section. As he faced us, he came to attention, drew his sword and rendered a military saber salute. This was not part of the official ceremony. It came from this old soldiers' heart and it went straight to our hearts. Such respect, such honor he showed to these old Navy veterans and comrades in arms. After the ceremony, I went up to the monument now adorned with many beautiful wreaths. An inscription on it's face bore the simple words, "They passed this way." A reception following the service was held at a restored historical home on the grounds of the park.

That night we attended our final event in Brisbane. It was the Coral Sea Ball, an elegant and formal black tie affair. It began with a reception followed by a seated dinner and then