ADDRESS BY COMMANDER ANDERSON ON THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA GIVEN AT KINGSGROVE RSL ON SUNDAY 6 MAY 2012

Veterans, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, as a serving officer in the Royal Australian Navy it is an honour for me to present this address to mark the 70th Anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea which was fought between 4 and 8 May 1942. I wish to commence by acknowledging and thanking all the veterans gathered here today for their service to the nation during times of conflict; but also for their ongoing contribution to the Australian community. I am privileged to be in your distinguished company.

Recently, we commemorated some other important naval anniversaries including the 70th Anniversary of Battle of the Java Sea and the Battle of Sunda Strait, where HMAS *Perth* and her Commanding Officer, Captain Hector Waller, and his ship's company fought so gallantly. We also remembered the heroic actions 70 years ago of Lieutenant Commander Robert Rankin and the crew of HMAS *Yarra*. Today however, we gather here at this cenotaph in quietness and community to honour and remember those Australians and Americans who were involved in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

In early 1942 as the list of military defeats for the Australian, British, American and Dutch military and naval forces began to mount there was an expectation throughout Australia that the Japanese would invade at any moment. It is a fact that the Japanese forces were conducting preparations for the capture of Port Moresby, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa. Their plan was to use 'maritime manoeuvre' to achieve surprise and to control the sea in order to strengthen their defensive perimeter and thereby cut the lines of communication between Australia and the United States of America.

It is important to note that the Japanese occupation of Port Moresby would have cut off the eastern sea approaches to Darwin and provided the Japanese Navy with a secure operating base on Australia's northern doorstep. The Battle of the Coral Sea prevented the direct assault of Port Moresby by sea, buying time and keeping open the northern sea lanes, and it made possible the successful defence of the Kokoda Track and the eventual recapture of New Guinea.

The Battle of the Coral Sea is widely recognised as the first encounter between fleets in which the surface forces did not sight one another and the only offensive weapons were aircraft. Australia's part in the battle consisted of the heavy cruiser, HMAS *Australia*, the light cruiser HMAS *Hobart*, and aircraft flown from bases in Queensland by both Australian and American crews.

Tactically, the Battle of the Coral Sea was pretty much a draw, with both fleets too battered to continue the fight. Strategically, however, it was an Allied victory as the Japanese Port Moresby invasion force—scheduled to land on 10 May—was ordered to turn back. And although both fleets withdrew simultaneously from the engagement, crucially, the Japanese had two vital fleet carriers that were too badly damaged to be available for the decisive Battle of Midway one month later. Had all the Japanese carriers been present at Midway, the chance of American victory would have been greatly reduced with dire consequences for the war in the Pacific.

In essence, the Battle of the Coral Sea was the indispensable prelude to success at Midway. The lessons learned by this battle should stand as an enduring reminder of the importance of a nation to be able to control of the sea—and this lesson should be at the forefront of considerations of future Australian security.

In conclusion, I would like to quote a few lines from 'A Sonnet' by Alf Woods:

> *Sound the Last Post, lest we forget the freedom that we cherish has been bought.*

> *Sound the Last Post to hold the memory bright, then sound the Reveille and keep the torch alight.*