



HISTORY MISHANDLED

A Print Media Lapse

by J.C.H. Gill

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Windows on the War is an apt title provided the person telling us presents truthfully what there is to see. By truthfully I mean presenting a view as coherently as possible with recourse to relevant historical sources and with an honest acknowledgement of perceived lacunae in that understanding. Few windows are entirely free of scratches or distortion. It is not permissible to take intuitive leaps to fill deficiencies or resort to down-right deception for the sake of a good story.

I refer to an item in the *Courier-Mail* of 25 January 1992 which purported to be a potted account of the Coral Sea Battle and indeed of the Pacific War. It began

Palm Tree Hit too Close for Comfort

The only reported land casualty of the battle of the Coral Sea was a palm tree hit by a bomb in Townsville. It reveals how close to Australia's shores the battle fought from May 4 to 8, 1200 km off the north Queensland coast, really was.

Having been in Townsville during the Coral Sea battle and closely aware of what was happening, I found the article unbelievable. During the Coral Sea battle no bombs fell on the mainland coast of north east Australia. The palm tree was hit during the last of three air raids on Townsville between 25 and 28 July 1942. The bomb fell near Cluden Racecourse which the Japanese aircraft captain mistook for an airfield.

The article went on to state that "The battle was fought in the sea and air by carrier aircraft from the USS *Yorktown* and *Lexington* and HMAS *Australia* and *Hobart*." The US ships were carriers but the Australian ships were cruisers and carried no offensive aircraft.

Further it states that “Tulagi was to be occupied first, on May 3, and then Port Moresby but the timetable was never carried out following the allied victory in the Coral Sea.” While the Port Moresby option had been lost, the Japanese timetable was still carried out in the Solomons. Tulagi was heavily attacked on 2 May and Japanese landed next day and then crossed over to Guadalcanal where they commenced construction of an airfield. United States forces with support from the RAN landed on Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942 and captured the airfield just as it was ready for use. Fierce sea, air and land battles ensued, but by the end of 1942 the Japanese had been defeated, apart from small pockets of resistance on some of the Solomon Islands.

The article concluded “Less than a month after the Coral Sea battle, Japan lost four of its best carriers in the Battle of Midway, which effectively ended the war in the Pacific.” Midway cannot be said to have “effectively ended the war in the Pacific.” The balance of forces in aircraft carrier strength was equalised but the superior industrial strength of the United States soon put them ahead in carrier construction. In any event, Midway was in June 1942 and it took until August 1945 for the war in the Pacific to be ended. Perhaps it might be conceded, to quote Churchill, it was “the end of the beginning”.

On the same pages as the article was a picture of an aircraft attacking shipping captioned “A US B-25 Mitchell bomber attacks Japanese supply ships in the battle for the Coral Sea”. I was at first uncertain where the B-25 bomber was operating. It was similar to pictures I had seen of B-25s in action in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943, but on study, what had at first appeared to be bomb bursts turned out to be the Beehives, small islands in the harbour at Rabaul. In any event the action was not in a Coral Sea battle context.

I wrote to the Courier-Mail expressing my astonishment at the ease with which history could be re-written. I then set out to correct the article. My letter was ignored.

I had heard about the Australian Press Council, said to be a watchdog over the improprieties of the Australian print media, so I lodged a complaint with it on the grounds that an event of extreme importance in Australian history had been falsely presented to the people of Australia. The reply brought little comfort. I was chided for not being versed in the Press Council’s complaints procedure and was sent a copy of their booklet of the Council’s Aims and Principles setting out inter alia the manner in which a complaint should be lodged. The letter then went on to say:

While I believe that many of your points are nitpicking, and that the tenor of the article is accurate and historically sound, I will nonetheless write to the editor of the Courier-Mail to see if he has any comments on your complaint.

I wrote back expressing regret that many of my points were considered to be nit-picking and asking if it was to be inferred that there is no longer a basic requirement for accuracy. I stated that I deemed that all reasonable steps to ensure the truth of the statements in the article complained of had not been fulfilled. I added:

The article has obviously been written by a lightweight. I find it interesting that a further account of the Coral Sea Battle appeared in the Sunday mail supplement on 1 March 1992. This, written by one of the senior feature writers on the Courier-Mail/Sunday Mail staff is a much more accurate account and is based on the Coral Sea Battle chapter in George Hermon Gill's (no relation) *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945*. You say the tenor of the subject article is "accurate and historically sound". Yes, we won (strategically) and they lost (despite a tactical win). But that does not alter the fact that the article was researched in a slovenly manner and written with a facile disregard for the truth.

Though the Sunday Mail article was a vast improvement, there was a side-bar column giving political reactions to the result of the Coral Sea battle. This contained a reference to US President "Theodore Roosevelt". This Roosevelt had left the presidency in 1909; Franklin D. Roosevelt was the man in 1942.

The Courier-Mail informed the Press Council that the photograph was really a bombing run over Rabaul Harbour. That the photograph was captioned as it was, was an error by the sub-editor concerned. The editorial manager of the Courier-Mail telephoned me and explained it was "one of those things that happen". He knew nothing about the other matters about which I had complained.

As far as the Press Council was concerned, it informed me that my further letter had also been forwarded to the Courier-Mail and was there any further action I wanted on my complaint. I replied in the negative and received a very prompt reply that my file had been closed. I wrote straight away to say that if any reply was received to my further letter I would be glad to know the contents. This was over three months ago and I have heard nothing.

It was an interesting exercise. It leaves a doubt in my mind as to the probity and credibility of the print media and the efficacy of the Press Council. It accepted one admission of fault, but did not bother to require any other explanation of the many points which were misleading or even deceptive. Apparently as long as the journalist comes up with something of which "the tenor ... is accurate and historically sound" it does not matter about any farrago of nonsense which may be used as a filler. I may be wrong, but I have a strong feeling that the fuss I created resulted in the much superior article of 1 March.

I have written a number of entries for the Australian Dictionary of Biography and have become aware how the standards of journalistic report have slipped this century. A century ago press reports and obituaries were a historian's delight. Today obituaries are often scimped in their content on occasion present facts about the wrong person. William Randolph Hearst and his grey eminence, Arthur Brisbane, have much to answer for in the lowering of the standards of journalism.



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