GHOSTS OF LADY LEX

PAUL G. ALLEN AND HIS EXPEDITION TEAM HAVE MADE AN AMAZING DISCOVERY THAT IS HELPING US INCREASE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

BY HOWARD CARTER

As readers of this publication well know, Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist Paul G. Allen has invested long and heavy in making sure future generations realize the importance of our Second World War generation and their sacrifice and devotion to ensure our country's freedom.

Mr. Allen and his expedition group have made a new and stunning find — the final resting place of the USS *Lexington*. "*Lexington* was on our priority list because she was one of [the first American] capital ships that was lost during WWII," stated Robert Kraft, who is director of subsea operations for Mr. Allen. "Based on geography, time of year, and other factors, I worked together with Paul Allen to determine what missions to pursue. We've been planning to locate the *Lexington* for about six-months and it came together nicely."

Originally commissioned as a battlecruiser, the decision was made in 1925 to complete the *Lexington* as an aircraft carrier. She was the lead ship of the *Lexington*-class and her only other sistership was the USS *Saratoga*, which had been commissioned a month earlier. *Lexington* entered service in 1928 and was assigned to the Pacific Fleet for her entire career. *Lexington* and *Saratoga* were used to develop and refine USN carrier tactics and both carriers took part in annual military exercises.

Lexington was at sea when the Pacific War began on 7 December 1941, ferrying vitally needed Wildcats to Midway Island. Her mission was cancelled and she returned to Pearl Harbor a week later. After a few days, she was sent to create a diversion for the force *en route* to relieve the besieged Wake Island garrison by attacking Japanese installations in the Marshall Islands. However, Wake surrendered before the relief force got close enough, and the mission was cancelled.

A planned attack on Wake in January 1942 was also cancelled when a Japanese submarine sank the oiler that was required to supply the carrier's fuel for the return trip. *Lexington* was sent to the Coral Sea the following month to block any Japanese advances into the area. The ship had been spotted by Japanese recon aircraft while approaching Rabaul, but her aircraft shot down most of the Japanese bombers that attacked her. Together with USS *Yorktown*, she successfully attacked Japanese shipping off the east coast of New Guinea in early March. This shows just what a close thing it was for the outnumbered American forces and the vitally needed carriers were constantly escaping destruction from Japanese capital ships, aircraft, and submarines.

Lexington was briefly refitted in Pearl Harbor at the end of the month and rendezvoused with *Yorktown* in the Coral Sea in early May. A few days later the Japanese began Operation *Mo*, the invasion of Port Moresby, New Guinea. The two American carriers attempted to stop the enemy and sank the light carrier *Shoho* on 7 May during the Battle of the Coral Sea. However, they did not encounter the main force with the carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* until the following day.

Aircraft from *Lexington* and *Yorktown* badly damaged *Shokaku*, but the enemy planes hit the *Lexington* and hit her hard. A mixture of air and aviation fuel in her improperly drained aircraft fueling trunk lines (which ran from the keel tanks to her hangar deck) ignited, causing a series of massive explosions and fires that could not be controlled.

The order was given to abandon the carrier. At that point, 216 sailors had died in the bomb blasts, torpedo strikes, and fuel explosions. On fire and listing, the order was given to sink *Lexington* so that the enemy could not capture the carrier. USS *Phelps* closed on the carrier and fired five torpedoes into the stricken ship between 1915 and 1952 hrs. Immediately after the last torpedo hit, she went down by the bow, but nearly on an even keel finally slipped beneath the waves. A rescued *Lexington* officer watching the event said, "There she goes! She didn't turn over. She's going down with her head up. Dear old Lex — a lady to the last!" Some 2735 crewmen were rescued.

"As we look back on our Navy throughout its history, we see evidence of an incredible amount of heroism and sacrifice. The actions of Sailors from our past inspire us today," stated Sam Cox, Director of the Naval History and Heritage Command and retired US Navy rear admiral. "So many ships, so many battles, so many acts of valor help inform what we do now."

Incredible image of a *Lexington* Douglas TBD-1 Devastator resting on the bottom with the sunken carrier. Damage to the Devastator may have come from the initial Japanese attack or impact when the carrier hit the bottom.