

THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA EXPLAINED



US Navy carrier aircrew just before boarding their aircraft for another mission. The risks of accidents, especially during take-off and landing, was ever present.

Crews who survived a landing well away from the ships faced time in their lifejackets, or far more preferable, in a life raft. Hopefully, rescue would soon come. The USAAF and the US Navy were proactive in trying to prepare for it. In the early days of the war, they alerted submarines to ditchings and eventually began placing submarines on flight paths. Seaplanes were also used to search for downed aviators, and also if possible to land on the water to pick them up. This technique reached its zenith with “Dumbo” seaplanes – named after the flying baby elephant in the 1941 Walt Disney movie of the same name – specialised machines which would be equipped with specialised crews and equipment designed for rescue. For example, Catalinas were equipped with a small platform that could be braced against the side of the flying boat’s hull to allow a team of two crewmen to lean out into the water and rescue a swimmer.

Cash Barber, a Black Cat aviation machinist’s mate, flew on Dumbo missions throughout the Pacific:

Every time there was a big bomb raid on an island, whether it was Air Force or Navy carriers, there’d be two or three Catalinas nearby, just waiting for a mayday ... If somebody was going down, we’d be there to pick ‘em up.