The Battle of the Coral Sea (4–8 May 1942) was a pivotal action in the defence of Australia during the Pacific War. Fought over 1.5 million square kilometres of ocean, it was the first sea engagement contested principally by opposing groups of carrier-launched aircraft without the surface fleets coming within direct sight of each other. The RAAF, while not a large component of the Allied forces engaged at the Coral Sea, nonetheless made important contributions in the lead up to the battle and in shaping the course of the battle itself.

The operation, codenamed ‘MO’, which the Japanese launched in the first days of May had twin objectives. It aimed, first, to consolidate the defensive barrier established by Japanese forces in the island chains across Australia’s north, by seizing control of the last major base held by the Allies in New Guinea at Port Moresby. Secondly, it was to begin a process of isolating Australia by extending Japanese control over the groups of islands east and south-east of New Guinea, thereby severing vital sea-lanes between Australia and the United States, beginning with the southern Solomon Islands. Though limited in intent, the operation entailed large naval forces organised into six separate groups moving from widely separated starting points. Most importantly, the plan included the light carrier Shōhō as well as the 5th Carrier Division, centred around the two large modern aircraft carriers Shōkaku and Zuikaku, both veterans of the raid on Pearl Harbor.

The scale of these moves—when detected by the Americans while still in the preparatory stage during late April—were taken by the Allies as likely signalling an attempted invasion of Australia itself. An additional American task force led by the large carrier USS Lexington was immediately dispatched from Hawaii to reinforce the task force led by USS Yorktown which was already in the Coral Sea. As a consequence, the Allies were reasonably well-placed to respond when the Japanese launched the first phase of Operation MO with a move towards Florida Island in the southern Solomons.

Lying directly in the path of the first Japanese task force was the RAAF Advanced Operating Base (AOB) at Tulagi, manned by a combined force of No 11 Squadron, RAAF, operating Catalina flying-boats, and army commandos of the Australian 2/1 Independent Company. The Japanese planned to seize the Tulagi seaplane station, not only to deny its use by the Allies, but to use it as a base for their own maritime surveillance floatplanes. Despite heavy Japanese air raids from land-based bombers operating from Rabaul, No 11 Squadron continued to operate until the Japanese invasion force was within 35 miles of the island. These operations included the first offensive action taken by the Allies in the lead-up to the Coral Sea battle—a daring attack on the Japanese landings ships, carried out on 1 May by Flying Officer Bob Hirst and the crew of Catalina A24-14. The next day the Australian aircraft and personnel were safely evacuated, only hours before the Japanese arrived early on 3 May. Aircraft from USS Yorktown, alerted to the Japanese presence by RAAF surveillance and Australian coastwatchers, launched air raids which destroyed or damaged several of the Japanese surface vessels. More importantly, five of the six Japanese F1M2 ‘Pete’ reconnaissance floatplanes which had arrived at Tulagi immediately after its seizure were also destroyed. The loss of these aircraft greatly diminished the later ability of the Japanese to locate and track the American aircraft carriers.
As the Japanese and American fleets closed with each other in the Coral Sea, accurate reconnaissance was at a premium. Both sides were engaged in a race to be the first to locate the enemy, particularly their carriers, and destroy them. Throughout the battle, Japanese and Allied carrier and land-based aircraft patrolled the skies, searching for any signs of enemy ships. RAAF Catalina squadrons played a pivotal role in this endeavour. Operating from Port Moresby, No 11 Squadron, along with the Catalinas of Cairns-based No 20 Squadron, provided vital information on the location of the Japanese forces in the Coral Sea throughout the battle. The loss of Tulagi and aggressive air operations by the Japanese made this an arduous and dangerous task. On 4 May, Catalina A24-18, commanded by Flying Officer Allan Norman, was attacked and shot down by Japanese aircraft, probably from the light aircraft carrier Shōhō; Norman and his crew were taken prisoner and later executed. The risk to aircrews, however, seemed justified, when on 5 May, Flight Lieutenant Frank Chapman and his crew in Catalina A24-17 sighted the Shōhō and her escorts. This sighting was quickly followed by a report from Flight Lieutenant Norm Fader and the crew of A24-12 that more enemy vessels were bound for New Guinea. Next day Squadron Leader Gough Hemsworth and his crew in A24-20 were shot down and killed after reporting the sighting of a strong enemy force heading towards the Jomard Passage. These three sightings confirmed the immediate threat posed to Port Moresby by the Japanese.

With the Japanese invasion forces located, they were successfully blocked from approaching New Guinea by a strong Australian-US force of cruisers and destroyers commanded by Rear-Admiral Jack Crace, RN, in HMAS Australia. The Japanese plans received a further setback on 7 May when, alerted to the presence of the Shōhō in the Coral Sea by RAAF and other Allied reconnaissance aircraft, and Australian coastwatchers, aircraft from the USS Lexington and USS Yorktown attacked and sank the Japanese light carrier. With no air cover available to support a landing at Port Moresby, the Japanese fleet turned back.

Despite this success, the threat posed by the main Japanese carrier division to the American fleet remained. Over 7-8 May, Japanese and American aircraft provided vital sighting reports that enabled each fleet to launch their torpedo and dive bombers against the opposing carriers. By the close of 8 May each side had lost an aircraft carrier and all of the remaining carriers had sustained damage and had lost most of their aircraft and crews. With the air groups badly depleted, the opposing fleets withdrew. In a final curtain call on 10 May, a Hudson of No 32 Squadron, RAAF, attacked and damaged a large Japanese submarine in the southern area of the battle zone. For the Allies, the RAAF had fired the opening and closing shots of the Battle of the Coral Sea.

As a direct consequence of the Coral Sea action, the Japanese carrier forces available to fight at Midway the following month were significantly depleted. Closer to home, the Japanese were forced overland along the Kokoda Track in their attempt to take Port Moresby. This resulted in the RAAF fighting for air superiority over Port Moresby and in the Battle of Milne Bay. Both of these operations will be the subjects of future Pathfinders.