

DECEMBER 1945

ILL PREPARED, WE FOUGHT GRIMLY

IN VICTORY it is easy to forget we might have lost. But mere mention of the six months after Pearl Harbor brings uncomfortable memories of the tremendous early Jap advantage in the Pacific and the menace of Nazi subs off our coast in the Atlantic. This was our defensive phase, later called by Admiral King "a remarkable chapter in the history of naval warfare." It was during these months our Navy, with the British Fleet, rallied desperately to hold open the long tenuous sea lanes in both the Atlantic and Pacific.

What did America have to delay Jap expansion in the Far East after Pearl Harbor? There were Gen. MacArthur's forces stranded in the Philippines; marine garrisons at Guam and Wake; a few aviation units and our Asiatic Fleet. That fleet included the heavy cruiser *Houston*, light cruiser *Marblehead*, 13 overage destroyers, 29 submarines, 2 Catalina squadrons. This force was joined by the *Boise*—and the PTs. As the fleet bore the brunt of the Jap onrush American destroyers frequently found themselves taking on Jap cruisers. And always with the enemy was vastly superior land-based air power.

By January 1942 the Japs were well-entrenched in the Philippines and it was obvious they would reach for the rich Netherlands Indies and Borneo. American, Australian, and Dutch vessels joined forces in a vain attempt to halt the Japs in the Java Sea campaign. The odds were overwhelming and only four American destroyers of the joint force had escaped when the Japs invaded Java on 28 February.

Admiral Nimitz's Pacific Fleet sounded the rumblings of the big offensives to come when units under Admiral Halsey undertook raids on the Marshall and Gilbert Islands beginning 31 Jan 1942. Late in February came similar American naval raids on Wake and in March our warships struck at New Guinea ports of Lae and Salamaua.

But the real "shot in the arm" came on 18 April when medium Army land bombers took off from the carrier *Hornet* and bombed Tokyo.

Stung by the Doolittle raid, the Japs drove on, building bases in New Guinea, New Britain, the Solomons. They were now in a position to threaten Australia.

Then early in May, our Navy struck the blow that definitely checked the enemy advance and set the scene for possible offensive operations. This was the battle of Coral Sea, 7-8 May 1942. It was the first major naval engagement in history in which surface ships did not exchange a shot. Our price in this crucial battle was the carrier *Lexington*. But a victory for the Japs might have meant the invasion of Australia.