The Evolution of the U.S. Navy into an Effective Night-Fighting Force During the Solomon Islands Campaign, 1942 - 1943

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ABSTRACT

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The Evolution of the U.S. Navy into an Effective Night-Fighting Force During the
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On the night of August 8-9, 1942, American naval forces supporting the
amphibious landings at Guadalcanal and Tulagi Islands suffered a humiliating defeat in a
nighttime clash against the Imperial Japanese Navy. This was, and remains today, the
U.S. Navy’s worst defeat at sea. However, unlike America’s ground and air forces,
which began inflicting disproportionate losses against their Japanese counterparts at the
outset of the Solomon Islands campaign in August 1942, the navy was slow to achieve
similar success.

The reason the U.S. Navy took so long to achieve proficiency in ship-to-ship
combat was due to the fact that it had not adequately prepared itself to fight at night.
Fortunately for the United States, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed two highly
competent officers to lead the navy during the war – Admiral Ernest J. King (Commander
in Chief of the U.S. Fleet) and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz (Commander in Chief of the
Pacific Fleet). With amazing insight these two men and their staffs consistently
diagnosed many of the navy’s problems and circulated their findings throughout the fleet.
Unfortunately, the time needed to adequately assess past operations often led to the
distribution of these combat analyses months after subsequent encounters had already
taken place. Moreover, the naval tradition of endowing task force commanders with
freedom of action prompted King and Nimitz to refrain from issuing specific instructions
to task force commanders, often leading to the repetition of past errors and continued
tactical defeats.

Of course, the U.S. Navy did eventually transform itself into an effective night-
fighting force. Much of the credit for this evolution was due to the emergence of new
commanders who heeded the lessons of the past and devised new tactics. When
combined with better training and improvements in weaponry, the operational
effectiveness of the U.S. Navy increased dramatically. By the end of 1943, the U.S.
Navy dominated the nighttime seas of the South Pacific.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, American soldiers begin wars poorly. In 1776 they were routed and driven out of New York City, surrendered at Detroit in 1812, broke into a panicky retreat at Bull Run in 1861 and suffered a sharp riposte in their first clash against the Wehrmacht at Kasserine Pass in 1943. In the Pacific war against Japan, the army’s sister service was no different. In the navy’s first major surface action of World War II, a Japanese squadron virtually annihilated an Allied cruiser force on the night of August 8-9, 1942 at the Battle of Savo Island. This was, and remains today, the U.S. Navy’s worst defeat at sea. However, unlike America’s ground and air forces, which began inflicting disproportionate losses against their Japanese counterparts at the outset of the Solomon Islands campaign in August 1942, the navy was slow to achieve similar success. With a couple of exceptions, American naval units suffered greater losses than their enemy did during the nighttime surface battles of the Solomon Islands campaign of 1942-43. In fact, the navy continued to suffer tactical defeats for a year after its humiliation at Savo Island. Not until the end of 1943 did the U.S. Navy finally come to dominate its adversary in the South Pacific.

The reason the U.S. Navy took so long to achieve proficiency in ship-to-ship combat in the Solomons campaign is primarily two-fold. First, the navy had not adequately prepared for the type of warfare (i.e. night fighting) it found itself forced to engage in. Instead, the navy spent the prewar years preparing to fight what the service’s great theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan had called the “decisive battle” – a grand daylight fleet action.
Second, because the U.S. Navy expected a war with Japan to be decided by a
Jutland-like encounter between battle fleets, it lacked an applicable doctrine capable of
guiding commanders in the Solomons battles. When confronted with nighttime warfare
in confined waters between cruiser-destroyer task forces, U.S. commanders simply
adopted a modified version of their daytime doctrine. A small initial success in an
atypical circumstance two months after the Battle of Savo Island prompted subsequent
commanders to replicate this formula, with poor results.

Although the U.S. Navy was ill-prepared to engage the Imperial Japanese Navy in
nighttime combat, it was fortunate to have two highly competent officers in charge.
Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor President Franklin Roosevelt (in
consultation with Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox) appointed Admiral Ernest J. King
to the resurrected post of Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet and (in March 1942) Chief of
Naval Operations, with his headquarters in Washington, DC. The President also tapped
the relatively junior Rear Admiral Chester W. Nimitz to be the Commander in Chief,
Pacific Fleet and (in March 1942) Pacific Ocean Areas, based in Pearl Harbor. With
amazing insight these two men and their staffs consistently diagnosed many of the navy’s
problems and circulated their published findings for the edification of the officer corps.
Unfortunately, the time needed to adequately assess past operations often led to the
distribution of these combat analyses months after subsequent encounters had already
taken place. Moreover, the naval tradition of endowing task force commanders with
freedom of action (within the bounds of established doctrine) prompted King and Nimitz
to refrain from issuing specific instructions to task force commanders, often leading to
the repetition of past errors and continued tactical defeats.
In addition to the time lag problem, the avoidance of previous missteps was hampered by the “fog of war.” Exact reconstruction of events and determination of damage inflicted on the enemy during nocturnal engagements proved nearly impossible. Commanders, in good faith, reported enemy sinkings and destruction far beyond the reality. These exaggerated claims tended to validate faulty modus operandi and, in some cases, to convince commanders that tactical defeats had actually been decisive victories.

Of course, the U.S. Navy did eventually transform itself into an effective night-fighting force. Much of the credit for this evolution was due to good staff work in Washington and Pearl Harbor. Officers at King’s and Nimitz’s headquarters produced insightful analyses of the navy’s many engagements, enabling subsequent commanders to benefit from these experiences. Over time capable and well-informed new officers emerged who heeded the lessons of the past and devised new tactics. When combined with better training and improvements in weaponry, the operational effectiveness of the U.S. Navy increased dramatically. By the end of the Solomon Islands campaign the navy had acquired proficiency in the art of nocturnal surface warfare, enabling it to dominate the nighttime seas in the South Pacific.
CHAPTER ONE
BAPTISM OF FIRE IN SAVO SOUND

The U.S. Navy before December 7, 1941

After dismantling its small navy following the War of Independence, the United States Congress resurrected the maritime service when it authorized the construction of six frigates in 1794. Frigates were the cruisers of the sailing age – medium-sized ships that could destroy enemy warships of similar size or smaller, yet possessed the speed to outrun the more heavily-gunned line-of-battle ships. For most of the 19th century the principal vessel of the U.S. Navy was the frigate. This ship was ideally suited to undertake the two primary tasks assigned to the navy – protecting American trade in peacetime and raiding an enemy’s ship-borne commerce in wartime. The former duty typically involved a display of might against a lesser naval power, such as Algiers around the turn of the 19th century. The latter duty entailed depredations against the merchantmen of a superior maritime nation, such as Great Britain during the War of 1812.

To be sure, the U.S. Navy engaged in other tasks on occasion. In peacetime these included “showing the flag” in foreign lands and undertaking exploration. In wartime the navy conducted amphibious operations (such as at Vera Cruz in 1847) and enforced a blockade (against the Confederacy during the Civil War). Yet these duties were seen as secondary to the primary mission of protecting and/or attacking commercial vessels.

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, the U.S. Navy began an eighteen-year decline. Other concerns, such as the settling of the western half of the continent, led to the near collapse of the once vibrant fleet. By the early 1880s the U.S. Navy was a
collection of decrepit and obsolete sailing vessels and coastal monitors. But renewed interest in a respectable naval force prompted Congress to authorize the building of three steel cruisers in 1883, followed by others later in the decade. In accordance with tradition, these were built for the purpose of attacking an enemy’s commercial vessels in times of war or smashing the light warships of inferior naval powers, such as those in Latin America.

By 1890, however, America’s naval policy was about to undergo a major transformation. In that year Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, a former instructor and the current president of the recently founded Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, published a book called *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. In it Mahan argued that sea power had been the means through which Great Britain had attained its status as the world’s dominant nation. By controlling the sea lanes – the global highways of commerce – Great Britain had risen to the pinnacle of global power. Mahan wrote that the United States could achieve similar greatness if it built a navy designed to control the sea. This, of course, could only be accomplished by the construction of a battle fleet. As Mahan saw it, the U.S. Navy’s traditional mission of a *guerre de course* was faulty because raiding enemy merchantmen would never result in command of the sea. To safeguard the nation’s commerce and protect its coasts from invasion, it was necessary to destroy the enemy’s battle fleet. And this could only be done by an American navy replete with big-gunned battleships. For Mahan, any war against an overseas opponent would be decided by a grand clash between opposing fleets – the so-called “decisive battle.” Once the enemy’s fleet was destroyed, command of the sea, and victory, would naturally follow.
Influenced by Mahan’s arguments, the United States Congress authorized the construction of three battleships in 1890. Subsequent authorizations for bigger and more powerful battleships followed. But it was President Theodore Roosevelt who greatly accelerated the American battleship building program. Determined to build a fleet capable of backing up his “big stick” foreign policies in the Western Hemisphere, Roosevelt got Congress to agree to the construction of ten battleships in his first term as President.\(^1\) The battleship-building race intensified with Great Britain’s introduction of the HMS *Dreadnought* in 1906. Dispensing with mixed gun calibers and reciprocating engines, the British warship featured ten twelve-inch guns and turbine engines. The *Dreadnought*’s superior speed, firepower and armor protection rendered all other battleships obsolete. To keep the U.S. Navy competitive with the new standard, Roosevelt petitioned Congress for appropriations to build similar ships. When he left office in 1909, the U.S. Navy had grown to the point where it and the German High Seas Fleet rivaled one another for second place among the world’s navies.

American naval leaders and policy-makers became so infatuated with the battleship that by 1911 the U.S. Fleet was dangerously unbalanced. Of the 135 surface ships in commission, 33 were battleships. To protect these expensive warships, the navy deployed only 50 destroyers – the small, fast ships designed to “destroy” enemy torpedo boats (or other destroyers) attempting to attack the battleships.\(^2\) In addition to

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destroyers, the battleship building frenzy had left the U.S. Navy short of other vessels as well, including cruisers and auxiliary craft.

Although President Woodrow Wilson had gotten Congressional approval in 1916 to expand the battle fleet further, America’s entry into World War I put a hold on capital ship construction in favor of anti-submarine craft. After the war ended in 1918, an aversion to renewing the naval arms race prompted President Warren Harding and his Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes to summon the leaders of the world’s naval powers to Washington, DC in 1921 to discuss naval disarmament. The result was a series of agreements whereby the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France and Italy decided to bring their battleship fleets into line according to agreed-upon tonnage ratios. Most prominent among these accords was the famous 5-5-3 ratio of battleship strength among the United States, Great Britain and Japan. After the final scrapping of warships took place, the U.S. and Royal Navies would keep only fifteen battleships in commission, with Japan limiting itself to nine. The same tonnage ratio was also set for aircraft carriers, primarily because the signatories feared that such ships might be converted into battleships during wartime. Not surprisingly, these arrangements sparked an increase in the construction of smaller ships in Britain and Japan. In the United States, however, the fiscally conservative Harding and Coolidge administrations kept naval appropriations low, allowing the Royal and Imperial Navies to deploy superior numbers of cruisers and other craft. Although a new agreement in 1930 among Britain, Japan and the United States capped cruiser, destroyer and submarine holdings at a slightly more equitable ratio for Japan, America neglected to build up to its allotment until the late 1930s, following the expiration of the 1930 treaty.
Despite the reduction in their number, the battleship remained at the center of naval thought in the United States and elsewhere. During the 1920s and 1930s American planners predicted that a war against Great Britain or Japan would be decided by a Mahanian “decisive battle” between battle fleets. By the 1930s, with war against Britain increasingly unlikely, American officers focused their attention on Japan as their probable adversary of the future. In 1911 American naval strategists had produced a formal plan for such a war, known as War Plan Orange (orange being the color assigned to Japan). Over the years this plan had undergone various modifications, but its basic premise remained the same – the U.S. Navy would steam across the Pacific, destroy the Imperial Fleet in a grand daytime action, followed by a blockade of the home islands to induce Japan’s capitulation.

To test the feasibility of this plan, officers at the U.S. Naval War College conducted numerous war games that pitted the “Blue” U.S. Navy against the “Orange” Japanese Navy. Although the scenarios of these simulations varied widely, they focused on the daytime “decisive battle” between the American and Japanese fleets. The war games also reflected the navy’s perception of the expected battle – a methodical long-range gunnery duel of attrition. For example, according to the game rules (which were based on an estimation of the relative strengths of the two navies’ warships), U.S. cruisers (by virtue of their armor configuration and penetrating power of their eight-inch guns) were credited with an advantage against Japanese cruisers at ranges of 16,000 - 20,000 yards. If the range fell below 15,000 yards, this American superiority

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disappeared. Consequently, the war simulations in Newport reinforced the American doctrine of long-range gunnery battles.4

To be sure, the Naval War College ran simulations of nighttime torpedo attacks by “Orange” destroyers against the “Blue” fleet. Although these attacks were sometimes successful, game rules did not favor such attacks. Not only were torpedoes assigned short effective ranges (about 9,000 yards), but U.S. cruisers struck by a single torpedo incurred little impairment to their combat effectiveness, except for a reduction in speed. (This was not a completely unreasonable assumption given the relatively small warheads on U.S. torpedoes.) On the other hand, “Orange” destroyers usually suffered high losses in these attacks, leading game observers to the conclusion that such strikes were not worth the cost for the attacker.5

For the expected clash between battle fleets, U.S. Navy planners devised a battle plan that sought to maximize the employment of the fourteen- and sixteen-inch guns of the battle line. Once the enemy was detected, the American fleet would abandon its anti-aircraft and anti-submarine cruising formation, assume its battle disposition and maneuver to place the opponent on its beam. As the battleships formed into a column, the cruisers and destroyers would assemble off their bow and quarter, on the engaged side, leaving the battleships’ beam clear for gunfire. Closest to the battleships would be a squadron of destroyers and light cruisers whose job it was to protect the capital ships from torpedo attack by enemy destroyers and cruisers. Further away from the battle line would be a second set of destroyers and light cruisers, with a division of heavy cruisers

5 Ibid., 17-120, 128.
stationed even further out. These ships comprised the offensive element of the screen and were to undertake a torpedo attack against the enemy’s battleships after the commencement of gunfire, when the enemy would presumably be preoccupied with the gun duel. These outlying cruisers would turn toward the enemy and blast a hole in his screen, allowing the destroyers the opportunity to approach the enemy battle line for a torpedo attack. Although American planners hoped this torpedo strike would do some damage, this was seen as peripheral to the main gun action between the opposing battleships, the outcome of which would decide the battle and the war.⁶

Aircraft carriers might also be involved in this fleet action. Operating in the rear, their torpedo and dive bombers would lend additional firepower to the battle. But like the destroyers’ torpedo attack, carrier-based air strikes were regarded as of secondary importance. Except for a few iconoclasts, the U.S. leadership firmly believed that the naval rifle was the principal arbiter of sea power. As late as July 1941 a Naval War College staff study declared that the gun is

the primary naval weapon and there seems to be no reason at present for a change of opinion. The torpedo, the bomb or the mine may be most effective in particular circumstances but in the last analysis it is the gun which will decide the fate of navies on the high seas. Because of its range, accuracy and rapidity of fire, its hitting power and ammunition supply, the gun can do the greatest damage… The tactical effort is still centered around a gun action and other weapons are brought into play in an effort to create a favorable situation for the gun…⁷

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⁶ War Instructions, United States Navy, 1934, 90, Command File, World War II, Box 108, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine, United States Fleet, 1941 (U.S.F. 10), 29-31, Command File, World War II, Box, 270, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Naval War College Staff Presentation, “Tactical Employment of the Fleet,” October 29, 1937, 3, Record Group 38, Box 34, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

⁷ Naval War College Staff Presentation, “Types and Limitations of Naval Weapons,” July 8, 1941, 3, Record Group 38, Box 34, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
This “gun-club” mentality that pervaded the prewar U.S. Navy did not pertain only to battleships. The navy’s faith in the gun was such that in the early 1930s it began building cruisers without torpedo batteries and removed them from those already in commission, an action that was unprecedented among the world’s navies. The U.S. Navy’s General Board gave its approval for these actions because it agreed with the scheme’s proponents that the growing accuracy of long-range cruiser gunfire made it very unlikely that these ships would have an opportunity to use short-ranged torpedoes, which were liable to detonation from enemy shell fire.⁸

Although confident of victory, American planners recognized that a war against Japan would be a difficult endeavor. Not only was the Imperial Japanese Navy a capable adversary, but it would have the advantage of fighting close to home. Expecting war to begin with a Japanese invasion of the Philippines, American strategists realized that the U.S. Navy would have to confront its foe in the western Pacific, far from its bases of support in Hawaii and on the U.S. West Coast. Officers at the Naval War College likened this sally toward the Philippines to Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812, with the U.S. Navy plunging into a vast and hostile theater, encountering pockets of resistance and stretching its logistical line to the breaking point before a showdown took place with the enemy’s main force.⁹ Although the Grand Army met disaster in Russia, American strategists believed they would avoid such a fate. While the U.S. Fleet would probably be exhausted after its arduous journey across the Pacific, the Americans reckoned that


their larger battle line would be the deciding factor in the “decisive battle.” Given the military axiom that an attacker typically required 50 percent more striking power than the defender to be successful, the Americans were optimistic that their 15-to-9 battleship advantage (yielding a 67 percent margin of superiority) would be sufficient to achieve victory.

As disciples of Mahan, the Japanese also built a battle fleet designed to win control of the seas by defeating their opponent in the “decisive battle.” This strategy had been successfully carried out in the Tsushima Strait against Tsarist Russia’s Baltic Fleet in 1905. And Japan expected a war against the United States to be similarly decided by a daylight fleet action in the western Pacific. The Japanese, of course, were not blind to the U.S. Navy’s numerical advantage. Because they recognized that their trans-Pacific rival would come into the war with a larger fleet (at least in battleships), the Japanese planned to conduct preliminary air and nocturnal torpedo attacks against their opponent in order to whittle him down to numerical parity before the Jutland-style encounter took place. Consequently, they spent years engaging in nighttime exercises and practicing nighttime cruiser-destroyer torpedo strikes. The U.S. Navy, on the other hand, generally wished to avoid action at night. Its leaders believed that it had little to gain from such an encounter, where a superior fleet risked “forfeiture… of its most valuable asset, its coordinated hitting power.”10 Intending to smash the Imperial Fleet in a long-range gunnery duel, American admirals feared that darkness might result in a close range mêlée, a situation that they did not welcome.

10 War Instructions, United States Navy, 1934, 37; Commander Destroyers, Battle Force, Night Search and Attack, Destroyer Tactical Bulletin No. 2-40, November 1940, Record Group 38, Box 30, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
To give themselves an edge when war came, Japanese naval officers worked their ships and drilled their seamen far more vigorously than their American counterparts. Not only did Japanese sailors at sea endure seven-day workweeks for months at a time, but it was not unusual for their officers to keep them at their battle stations all night long.\textsuperscript{11} In contrast, the U.S. Navy’s prewar training schedule was more easy-going. The navy usually conducted its summer exercises in the cool waters off the coasts of New England or the Pacific Northwest. Winter maneuvers took place in the Caribbean or in Californian or Hawaiian waters. To appease its all volunteer crews and encourage re-enlistments, the navy conducted most of its exercises during weekdays, with ships in port for weekend liberty. This more relaxed regimen was also attributable to a combination of limited budgets, a peacetime mindset, Yankee smugness and, most importantly, the fear of incurring warship damage. American commanders were haunted by the navy’s unofficial motto that a captain who runs his ship aground will suffer a fate worse than death. As a result, U.S. naval exercises were less frequent and less realistic than those of Japan. Although usually performed during daylight hours, on the few occasions when the U.S. Navy held nighttime maneuvers, safety – not realism – was the overriding concern. Regulations prohibited the use of smoke screens or the firing of star shells over other vessels (as would be done in wartime). To avoid accidents, risk adverse commanders supplemented these precautions by keeping speeds low and cruising in simple linear formations.\textsuperscript{12} Japanese exercises, on the other hand, were held in the stormy waters of


\textsuperscript{12} Commander Destroyers, Battle Force, Current Doctrine, Destroyers, 1940, 23, World War II Command File, Box 273, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
the North Pacific (the better to toughen the crews and inure them to hardship) and often involved high-speed, close-in nighttime maneuvers, described by one officer as “more heroic than under battle conditions.” Such vigorous training occasionally led to some serious collisions, with significant loss of life. But such accidents were not career-enders in the Imperial Navy. Instead, the naval leadership viewed such spirited exercises as a necessary price to pay for operational excellence.

Given their plans to engage the U.S. Navy after dark, the Japanese developed an array of outstanding nighttime equipment and weaponry. The Imperial Navy fielded the world’s finest pyrotechnics and light-gathering optical devices and (in contrast to the blinding flash generated by U.S. gunfire) employed nearly flashless gunpowder. But Japan’s most important technological innovation was the Type 93 “Long Lance” torpedo. This oxygen- (rather than air-) fueled missile could travel 22,000 yards at 49 knots or an astounding 44,000 yards (nearly 25 miles) at 36 knots. (By comparison, the U.S. Navy’s Mark 15 destroyer torpedo had a range of only 6,000 yards at 45 knots or 15,000 yards at 26 knots.) With a warhead containing over one thousand pounds of explosive (compared to less than 500 pounds in the Mark 15), the “Long Lance” was also twice as deadly as its American variant. American officers, who tended to believe that their own weapons were the best in the world, had no idea that Japan’s surface-launched torpedo was so superior to their own. (They also did not realize that the exploding mechanisms on their

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14 Ibid., 210-211.

Mark 15s were faulty and rarely performed as designed. It would take eighteen months of war before the U.S. Navy finally corrected the weapon’s problems.)

Cognizant that their perfection of an oxygen-driven torpedo represented a major breakthrough, the Japanese made plans to make maximum use of this weapon. Not only did the Japanese intend to attrite the U.S. Fleet with nighttime torpedo strikes as it steamed across the Pacific, but they planned to conduct a major torpedo attack against their enemy on the night before the “decisive battle,” followed by another during the fleet engagement the next day. Except for the harassing attacks, Japan’s cruisers were to play a major role in these actions. Unlike the U.S. Navy, which had removed the torpedo tubes from its cruisers, the Imperial Navy viewed its cruisers primarily as torpedo platforms. In short, Japan’s faith in torpedo warfare stood in sharp contrast to America’s belief in the supremacy of gunfire.

Wishing to avoid nighttime encounters, the U.S. Navy devoted little time to studying its offensive applications. Until 1941 its doctrine on nocturnal warfare stressed the means of defending against such an attack by the enemy’s light forces. For the most part, these measures were the same as those to be employed against such an attack by day, except that the cruisers and destroyers screening the battleships would employ star shells and searchlights to illuminate the enemy vessels, allowing all ships within range to fire on the intruders. U.S. naval leaders grew more confident of their ability to repel enemy torpedo attacks following the commissioning of the *Brooklyn*-class light cruisers in the late 1930s. Able to fire 150 rounds of six-inch shells a minute, these fast-shooting ships were seen as potent destroyer killers. The Commander in Chiefs’ annual reports for

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1940 and 1941 both praised these vessels for their outstanding performance in nighttime gunnery practices, where they struck the target an average of 22 percent of the time at 5,000-6,000 yards with star shell illumination and 33 percent of the time at 4,000 yards using searchlights.\textsuperscript{17} For a navy fearful of the night, these ships seemed to offer security against enemy depredations after dark.

Although the U.S. Navy emphasized defense (or evasion) at night, U.S. doctrine did provide for possible destroyer attacks upon the enemy battle line at night. According to the destroyers’ “Night Search and Attack” doctrine, destroyers would disperse into a scouting line to find the enemy, then re-assemble into divisional columns to conduct the torpedo attack.\textsuperscript{18} However, since fleet doctrine stipulated that destroyers generally were not to seek out nocturnal attacks prior to the daylight fleet action, these attacks were unlikely to occur.\textsuperscript{19}

It was not until late 1941 that procedures were established for independent cruiser-destroyer task groups to conduct nighttime torpedo attacks. However, this “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” doctrine was little more than a set of detailed instructions based on the policies that had guided the outer flank forces in a daytime fleet action. That to say, it called for cruisers to use their guns to open a hole in the enemy screen through which the destroyers would pass and launch a torpedo attack.

\textsuperscript{17} J. O. Richardson, Annual Report of the Commander-in-Chief, Unites States Fleet, July 1, 1939 to June 1940, July 27, 1940, 9, Command File, World War II, Box 257, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; H.E. Kimmel, Annual Report of the Commander-in-Chief, United States Pacific Fleet, July 1, 1940 to June 1941, August 15, 1941, 6, Command File, World War II, Box 229, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Report of Gunnery Exercises, U.S. Navy 1940-41, September 18,1941, Chapter 5, 61, Record Group 38, Box 61, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{18} Commander Destroyers, Battle Force, Night Search and Attack, Destroyer Tactical Bulletin No. 2-40, November 1940, Record Group 38, Box 130, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{19} War Instructions, United States Navy, 1934, 104.
It is somewhat ironic that the U.S. naval leadership was intimidated by the prospect of nighttime combat given the fact that its development of radar offered the potential of being able to “see” through the cloak of darkness. In the summer of 1940 the navy installed its first experimental sets aboard a handful of its capital ships. Capable of detecting aircraft, these devices were somewhat temperamental and required the mounting of a huge box spring-like antenna. In the fall of 1941 the SC radar set made its appearance.\textsuperscript{20} With a much smaller antenna, this radar could be installed on cruisers and destroyers relatively easily. This long-wave search radar was capable of detecting surface ships and aircraft, although the navy recognized that it was better suited to finding the latter.\textsuperscript{21} The U.S. Navy also developed a fire-control radar set. After the search radar discovered the enemy, the narrow-beamed fire-control radar (which featured a snow plow-shaped antenna) would be aimed in that direction until it acquired the target. Having done this, it could, theoretically, provide the guns with the necessary range and bearing data. Since the Japanese would not begin to introduce radar aboard their ships until 1943, the U.S. Navy would go to war with a device that could give it the upper hand in nighttime warfare. However, because the new machines were classified, the U.S. Naval War College did not introduce this element into their war games. Moreover, the recent introduction of radar did not permit the navy time to reevaluate its battle doctrines. Lastly, the complexity of the new device prevented most senior officers from realizing the potential of radio waves to alter the nature of nighttime combat.

\textsuperscript{20} U.S. Navy radars were designated with an “S” for types designed for searching or an “F” for fire-control sets. The second letter indicated subsequent models. Hence, SC was the third variant of the search type to be introduced, while the FC and FD radars were the third and fourth fire-control models.

\textsuperscript{21} Headquarters of the Commander in Chief, United States Fleet, Radar Bulletin No. 1, The Tactical Use of Radar, March 9, 1942, 5, Command File, World War II, Box 267, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
As the international situation intensified for the United States in the last months of 1941, the U.S. Navy prepared itself to fight German U-boats in the Atlantic and a Jutland-style encounter against the Imperial Fleet in the Pacific. Since a sizable portion of the U.S. Navy’s strength was stationed in the Atlantic, Pacific Fleet commander Admiral Husband Kimmel realized that it would be impractical to take his fleet into the western Pacific to interdict Japan’s expected move to the south against the Philippines, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. With his reduced battle fleet, Kimmel hoped to aid the Allied forces in the southwestern Pacific by attempting to lure Japan’s main battle fleet toward the Marshall Islands in the central Pacific and smash it in a daylight encounter with his nine available battleships (and support vessels). Kimmel’s plan to fight America’s first fleet action, of course, came to naught on the morning of December 7.

The Road to Savo Sound

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, U.S. plans to sortie the Pacific battle fleet toward the Marshall Islands to draw Japanese naval forces away from the colonial territories of the southwest Pacific and perhaps lure Japan’s Combined Fleet eastward for a possible showdown were nixed. When Admiral Nimitz assumed command of the crippled Pacific Fleet at the end of December, Admiral King gave him two primary tasks: to cover and hold the Hawaii – Midway Archipelago and its communications with the U.S. West Coast, and to protect the Hawaii – Australia sea

lanes and the island way stations along the route. Given this directive and his limited
resources, Nimitz was unable to directly challenge Japan’s moves into the southwest
Pacific. The meager forces of America’s Asiatic fleet and those of Britain and the
Netherlands were no match for the Imperial Japanese Navy and its air forces. After
sinking Britain’s two principal warships in the Far East – HMS *Prince of Wales* and
*Repulse* – with aircraft on the third day of the war, the Japanese proceeded to smash the
remaining Allied surface forces in the western Pacific at the Battles of Badung Strait,
Java Sea and Sunda Strait in February and March 1942. By the end of March Japan had
conquered territories stretching from Burma in the west to New Guinea and the Bismarck
Archipelago in the south to the Gilbert Islands in the east. Not only did this push Japan’s
enemies far away from the home islands, but the new acquisitions included the resources
Japan needed for economic self-sufficiency, especially oil.

While Japan was sweeping through the southwest Pacific and southeast Asia,
Nimitz employed his one remaining offensive element, the aircraft carrier task forces,
which had been absent from Pearl Harbor on December 7. In February and March 1942
fast carriers screened by cruisers and destroyers launched air strikes against Japanese
bases in the Marshall and Gilbert Island groups in the central Pacific. Although these
raids yielded negligible results, they did provide the crews with experience in wartime
operations. When Nimitz sent a carrier task force to New Guinea in March, U.S. war
planes scored a notable success in an attack against Japanese shipping supporting
landings on New Guinea’s north coast. This minor success helped convince the Japanese

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23 Commander in Chief United States Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas Command History, 7
December 1941 – 15 August 1945, 3, Command File, World War II, Box 229, Naval Historical Center,
Washington, DC Navy Yard.
commander of this operation to await carrier support before moving against the Allied base of Port Moresby on New Guinea’s south coast.

Despite the unprecedented Japanese success in conquering such a vast territory so quickly, Admiral King was already formulating a strategy for rolling back the Japanese tide. On March 5, 1942, with the Japanese offensive still in full swing, he wrote a memorandum to President Roosevelt outlining his plan. He reaffirmed his earlier instruction to Nimitz that the United States needed to hold the Hawaii – Midway Island chain and protect the sea communications to Australia via the establishment of strong garrisons on the islands along the way, including Samoa, Fiji, the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. Amazingly prescient, King concluded his memo by stating that once these objectives had been accomplished, he planned to “drive northwest from the New Hebrides into the Solomons and the Bismarck Archipelago” in the same step-by-step fashion as Japan had used in the South China Sea.24 Intrigued by this plan, Roosevelt gave it his tacit approval.25

Of course, before this strategy could be implemented, the Japanese juggernaut had to be stopped. This first took place in the Coral Sea. In the first week of May 1942 the Japanese planned to complete their conquest of New Guinea (considered to be Australia’s defensive breakwater) by undertaking a seaborne invasion of Port Moresby. To protect the operation’s eastern flank, a preliminary invasion of the island of Tulagi (in the southern Solomon Islands) was also planned. The Japanese landed unopposed on Tulagi and quickly established a seaplane base there. However, a U.S. aircraft carrier task force


disrupted the planned invasion of Port Moresby. In the world’s first encounter between aircraft carrier task forces, American dive bombers sufficiently damaged a Japanese carrier group to force its return to base. Deprived of air cover, the Japanese invasion fleet heading for Port Moresby aborted its mission.

A far more costly setback for the Imperial Navy took place the following month. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the commander of Japan’s Combined Fleet, sought to lure the remnants of the U.S. Pacific Fleet into a decisive battle by invading the central Pacific island of Midway. However, American decryption of Japanese codes gave Nimitz foreknowledge of the plan, enabling him to deploy all three of his available aircraft carriers in ambush. Yamamoto’s foolish dispersion of forces and inadequate Japanese air searches enabled American naval aircraft to sink four of Japan’s fleet carriers, forcing the cancellation of the Midway invasion and eliminating much of the Imperial Navy’s offensive power.

With Japan’s advances checked in the south and east, Admiral King saw his opportunity to implement his plan of rolling back the Japanese conquests from the New Hebrides in the southwest Pacific. But before he could compose a detailed plan, on June 8 General Douglas MacArthur, commander of Allied forces in the Southwest Pacific, made a bold (and unrealistic) proposal. If he were given two aircraft carriers and a division of troops trained in amphibious warfare, he would seize Rabaul – Japan’s primary naval and air base in the South Pacific – forcing the Japanese to fall back to Truk 700 miles to the north. Although the army’s Chief of Staff General George Marshall showed interest in this plan, King quickly convinced him of the impracticality of this scheme. Moreover, King had no intention of allowing MacArthur, who had little
knowledge of naval matters or the application of sea power, to command what he considered to be a primarily naval operation. On the other hand, the Solomon Islands (where King intended to strike first) lay within MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific zone. (To achieve unity of command the Joint Chiefs of Staff had agreed in March to divide the Pacific theater into two zones, the Southwest Pacific, under MacArthur, and the North, Central and South Pacific under Nimitz. Both men commanded all military forces within their designated area.) With MacArthur adamant that he command any operation within his theater and King equally determined that amphibious operations involving the Pacific Fleet be commanded by Nimitz, King and Marshall arranged a compromise. Agreeing that the capture of Rabaul was the ultimate objective, the two service chiefs issued a joint directive on July 2 in which they divided operations in the southwestern Pacific into three tasks. Task I called for the capture of “Santa Cruz Island, Tulagi and adjacent positions.” Task II involved the capture of the remainder of the Solomon Islands and the northeast coast of New Guinea, including the Japanese bases of Lae and Salamaua. Lastly, Task III called for the capture of “Rabaul and adjacent positions in the New Britain-New Ireland area.” Nimitz’s South Pacific Commander, Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, would take charge of Task I (which would be legitimized by moving the boundary between the Southwest and South Pacific theaters just west of Tulagi), while MacArthur would command Tasks II and III. Thus, there would be two active fronts pushing against the belly of the Japanese empire toward Rabaul – MacArthur’s forces driving northwestward along the New Guinea coast and Ghormley’s (later Halsey’s) forces driving northwestward in the Solomon Islands.

26 Joint Directive for Offensive Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area Agreed Upon by the United States Chiefs of Staff. Double Zero Files. Record Group 38, Box 42, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
Map 1. The Solomon Islands

In his haste to capitalize on the victory at Midway and seize the initiative before the
Japanese recovered from that debacle, King set the date for the commencement of Task I
– codenamed Operation Watchtower – for August 1 (later changed to August 7).
Although the pessimistic Ghormley recommended delay until additional forces could be
assembled, King refused, especially after the discovery on July 5 that the Japanese had
begun building an airfield on the island of Guadalcanal, 20 miles across the sound from
Tulagi. Once the airstrip was completed around mid-August, it would enable Japan to
project its airpower over the entire Solomon Islands and beyond, making the planned
landing virtually impossible. With this new information King and Nimitz, who were
meeting in San Francisco in early July to discuss the upcoming operation, dropped Santa
Cruz and substituted Guadalcanal as one of the two objectives of Task I. Despite the
meager resources available and the rushed preparations, America’s first amphibious
operation since the Spanish-American War would commence on August 7 with the
landing of the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

Three task forces participated in Operation Watchtower. Rear Admiral John S.
McCain’s Task Force 63 contained the land-based aircraft and seaplanes of the South
Pacific theater. McCain’s 282 planes were based primarily in the New Hebrides (600
miles south of Guadalcanal), New Caledonia (800 miles south of Guadalcanal) and the
Fiji Islands (1,300 miles southeast of Guadalcanal).27 Given these distances, only
McCain’s heavy bombers and flying boats could reach the Solomons. In order to provide
direct air support for the invasion Nimitz assigned Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher’s
Task Force 61, a three-carrier task group that operated south of the invasion area. Lastly,

27 Richard B. Frank, Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle (New York:
Random House, 1990), 625.
Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner’s Task Force 62 comprised the amphibious craft and its screen of six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and fifteen destroyers under the command of British Rear Admiral Victor Crutchley.

**The Battle of Savo Island**

At 0610 on the morning of August 7, the U.S. invasion fleet announced its arrival off Tulagi and Guadalcanal with a carrier-based air strike and naval bombardment of the target areas. The surprised defenders radioed the news of the American attack to the headquarters of the recently activated Japanese 8th Fleet at Rabaul. Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa, who had only arrived in Rabaul a week ago to assume command of this diminutive naval force of five heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, eight destroyers, five submarines and some smaller craft, immediately went to work with his staff to prepare a response. By the afternoon they had put together a plan to repel the intruders in the southern Solomons. In addition to air strikes against the enemy fleet, Mikawa gathered all the 8th Fleet warships available, including his flagship heavy cruiser *Chokai*, the four heavy cruisers of Cruiser Division 6, the two light cruisers of Cruiser Division 18 and one destroyer. With this force, he planned to steam to Savo Sound (the body of water between Savo, Tulagi and Guadalcanal Islands) and smash the invasion fleet in a night action.

Protecting Turner’s landing craft off Guadalcanal and Tulagi were the Allied warships commanded by Crutchley. During the daylight hours these vessels provided anti-submarine and anti-aircraft protection. After sunset Crutchley dispersed his warships to the three entrances to Savo Sound to ward off surface or subsurface intruders.

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28 Ibid., 628.
Map 2. The Battle of Savo Island
He deployed his two light cruisers and two destroyers to guard the eastern entrance to
Savo Sound. Between Savo and Tulagi Islands, he posted three heavy cruisers and a pair
of destroyers under the command of Captain Frederick Riefkohl (the skipper of the
*Vincennes*). Between Savo and Guadalcanal Islands, he placed another three heavy
cruisers (including his flagship HMAS *Australia*) and another pair of destroyers.
Crutchley also ordered the destroyers *Blue* and *Ralph Talbot* to patrol to the northwest
and northeast of Savo Island, providing the rest of his units with an early warning should
an enemy surface force approach the anchorage area from those directions. Crutchley left
the remaining seven destroyers as a close screen for the transports off Tulagi and
Guadalcanal.

Assisting Crutchley in his screening function were the reconnaissance aircraft of
MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific and McCain’s South Pacific commands. As luck would
have it, poor weather prevented McCain’s aircraft from adequately searching the central
Solomons region. However, on the morning of August 8 one of MacArthur’s aerial
scouts from New Guinea spotted Mikawa’s force heading south in the northern
Solomons. Unfortunately for the Allies, the pilot reported the force as consisting of three
cruisers, three destroyers and two seaplane tenders or gunboats.29 When Turner belatedly
received word of this contact around 1900 that evening, he concluded that the Japanese
force was en route to Rekata Bay on Santa Isabel Island (160 miles north of Guadalcanal)
to establish a seaplane base from which to attack his transports in the morning.30

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29 Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, August 23, 1942, 6, Record Group 38, Box 14, National
Archives II, College Park, MD.

To add to Turner’s problems, Fletcher radioed at 1807 that he was withdrawing Task Force 61 from the area due to fuel considerations and fears of Japanese torpedo planes.31 Both of these concerns were unfounded, but Ghormley nevertheless approved this action.32 With the unexpected departure of his air support, Turner summoned his screen commander Crutchley (who left his station with his flagship) and the operation’s ground commander, Marine Major General Alexander Archer Vandegrift, to his flagship around 2100 on the evening of August 8 to discuss the situation.

As Turner conferred with these officers, Mikawa’s formation closed in on Savo Sound. About an hour before midnight Mikawa sent his cruisers’ float planes aloft to report on the enemy’s position and to provide illumination during the battle. They subsequently informed Mikawa that enemy warships were present southwest and southeast of Savo Island, with numerous transports off Tulagi and Guadalcanal.33

At 2345 the picket destroyer Ralph Talbot sighted one of these planes and radioed its observation over the TBS (Talk Between Ships – a short-ranged radio frequency used by vessels to communicate with each other) circuit. Many men aboard the Allied ships sighted or heard one or more of the float planes and several of the ships received the Ralph Talbot’s message. But because the aircraft showed running lights, most observers assumed that they were scouts from Fletcher’s carriers.34 Turner, who was apprised of Fletcher’s earlier departure, knew any airplanes in the area could not be friendly. But the

31 Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, August 23, 1942, 5.
32 Morison, Struggle for Guadalcanal, 28.
33 Ibid., 1271-1273.
34 Ibid., 34.
Ralph Talbot’s transmission did not reach the commander of Task Force 62.\(^{35}\)

Consequently, the Allied vessels ignored the Japanese fliers. Mikawa now only had to slip past the two picket destroyers patrolling above Savo Island to surprise his enemy.

With the radar-equipped *Blue* and *Ralph Talbot* steaming back and forth across the northern entrances to Savo Sound, Crutchley and his captains felt confident that no enemy would be able to approach the anchorage area undetected. Unfortunately for the Americans, the SC type radar installed in the two picket destroyers was better suited for detecting aircraft rather than surface ships. Moreover, the landmass of nearby Savo Island apparently interfered with the returning radar pulses, causing the picket destroyers’ scopes to miss the approach of Mikawa’s column.\(^{36}\)

The lookouts aboard the two picket destroyers also failed to discover Mikawa’s vessels. Although the *Ralph Talbot* was too far away, the men aboard the *Blue* had an excellent opportunity to spot their enemy. Captain Toshikazu Ohmae, Mikawa’s chief of staff aboard the flagship *Chokai*, stated that at 0043 Japanese lookouts sighted an enemy destroyer 10,000 meters away, headed on a northeasterly course, “about to cross our bows from right to left.”\(^{37}\) Not wishing to reveal his force’s presence to a lone destroyer, Mikawa ordered his column to port and slowed to twenty-two knots in order to reduce the discernable foam and wakes generated by his vessels. With all guns trained on the American ship, Mikawa and his staff expressed a sigh of relief when the sentinel suddenly turned to starboard and reversed course. Mikawa’s column passed within 500

\(^{35}\) Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, August 23, 1942, 6.


yards of the Blue, yet the destroyer’s lookouts failed to notice them. Consequently, the ship sent no warning to Crutchley that enemy vessels were headed his way.

The Japanese column entered Savo Sound via the channel between Savo and Guadalcanal. The flagship Chokai led the way, followed by the four heavy cruisers of Cruiser Division 6 and the two light cruisers of Cruiser Division 18. The destroyer Yunagi fell back to guard the rear of the Japanese formation, remaining outside the sound. Crutchley’s group (less Crutchley and his flagship Australia, which had been called away by Turner) lay just ahead of Mikawa. The heavy cruiser HMAS Canberra, followed by the Chicago, steamed on a northwesterly heading flanked by destroyers Bagley and Patterson.

Mikawa increased his formation’s speed to thirty knots as all eyes peered forward, searching for the enemy force that an earlier float plane report placed south of Savo Island. With foreknowledge of what to expect and where to look, the Japanese lookouts spotted their adversary first. Less than a minute after the Blue had turned away from the Japanese column, one of the Chokai’s lookouts yelled “Three cruisers, nine degrees starboard, moving to the right.” Two minutes later, the Japanese sent torpedoes racing toward the unsuspecting Allied ships less than 9,000 yards distant. Mikawa turned his formation to port and prepared to open fire after his torpedoes had been given the opportunity to reach their targets.

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40 USSBS, 2:472.
Neither the *Canberra* nor the *Chicago* had received the Ralph Talbot’s earlier message of an unidentified aircraft overhead.41 With both ships’ captains in their cabins, the officers on duty quietly guided their vessels. The tranquil scene was interrupted at 0142 when lookouts on the *Chicago* saw two orange flashes near the surface of the water in the direction of Savo Island. These sentries did not realize that they were witnessing enemy torpedoes being discharged from their tubes. One minute later, a Japanese float plane dropped the first of five flares behind them, in the direction of the transports off Guadalcanal. At 0146 the *Chicago*’s lookouts spotted the first of three torpedo wakes approaching from the north. The first passed ahead by approximately seventy yards, followed by a second one that missed by only twenty yards.42 The third torpedo struck the ship’s starboard bow. The ensuing explosion was followed by Japanese gunfire, with the *Chicago* receiving its only shell hit, a 5.5-inch projectile against the foremast. The heavy cruiser replied with a spread of star shells from the secondary batteries, all of which failed to ignite.43

Six hundred yards ahead of the *Chicago*, the *Canberra*’s port lookout reported a ship dead ahead at 0143, which the officer and yeoman of the watch could not confirm. When the duty officer saw two torpedoes passing on either side of the ship, he sounded the alarm and called Captain Frank E. Getting to the bridge. Before the main guns could train out on a target, the Japanese showered the *Canberra* with eight-inch and secondary battery shells. In an impressive display of marksmanship, Mikawa’s gunners struck the

41 Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 104.
42 Ibid.
43 Howard D. Bode, USS *Chicago* Action Report, August 13, 1942, 2-3, Record Group 38, Box 910, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
Australian heavy cruiser twenty-four times in the opening minute. One or two torpedoes also struck the ship. Fires broke out at various points and both boiler rooms ceased functioning, stripping the vessel of all power and lighting. The ship replied with only a few four-inch rounds from its secondary port guns before going silent for good.\footnote{J. A. Walsh, HMAS Canberra Action Report, August 13, 1942, 1-2, Record Group 38, Box 1296, National Archives II, College Park, MD.}

Lookouts on the destroyer Bagley were the first to spot Mikawa’s formation at 0140. But rather than alerting the force via TBS, blinker light or illumination, the Bagley’s skipper, Lieutenant Commander George A. Sinclair, opted to concentrate on setting up a torpedo attack instead. The destroyer immediately swung left to unmask its starboard torpedo battery, but the responsible handlers failed to ready the missiles in time.\footnote{George A. Sinclair, USS Bagley Action Report, August 12, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 1296, National Archives II, College Park, MD.}

Despite having spotted the enemy relatively late, the Patterson first raised the alarm of enemy ships present. At 0146 the destroyer broadcast the message: “Warning, warning – strange ships entering harbor.”\footnote{Harry B. Heneberger, USS Quincy Action Report, August 12, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 27, National Archives II, College Park, MD.} Like the Ralph Talbot’s earlier transmission of an overhead plane, this message failed to reach Admiral Turner aboard his transport flagship.\footnote{Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, August 23, 1942, 7.} Like the Bagley, the Patterson attempted to launch a torpedo spread, but the noise of battle prevented the torpedo officer from hearing the order to fire. As the Japanese vessels disappeared into the night, neither the Chicago’s nor the Canberra’s main guns had fired a single shot.
As Mikawa led his warships toward the other group of American ships to the northeast, his column unintentionally split into two columns. The flagship *Chokai* and the first three heavy cruisers bore right while the last three cruisers bore left. After firing the last rounds against the first group, the Japanese turrets swiveled to the northeast. As Riefkohl’s vessels blithely cruised northwesterly at a slow ten knots, the two Japanese columns raced toward them from the southwest. Mikawa showed less patience and stealth against Riefkohl’s group. Rather than open with a preliminary torpedo attack, the *Chokai* and others illuminated all three American cruisers at 0150 and commenced firing guns and torpedoes a minute later at 7,700 yards distance.48

During Mikawa’s previous attack, the officers on duty in Riefkohl’s group had felt underwater tremors and seen distant flashes to the southwest. However, because clouds and mist obscured the view, most officers on duty attributed these phenomena to depth-charges and anti-aircraft fire from Crutchley’s destroyers.49 Not until the receipt of the *Patterson*’s warning did the watch officers begin to awaken from their stupor. Although all three heavy cruisers heard the message, confusion and indecision ensued because none of the captains was on the bridge at the time.

Among the three cruiser skippers, only Riefkohl, on the *Vincennes*, reached the bridge before the shooting began. His officers of the watch summoned him immediately after seeing suspicious glimmers to the southwest. Although they did not inform Riefkohl of the *Patterson*’s warning when he appeared on the bridge, Riefkohl did get the opportunity to see the distant gun flashes, which he identified as secondary caliber fire.50

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Suspecting that this might be a surface clash between Crutchley’s ships and an enemy decoy force (given the light caliber), Riefkohl chose to continue his patrol. He feared that the action to the southwest might be an attempt to lure his squadron away from its station in order to permit a heavier force to approach the transport area.51

In the meantime, Riefkohl took the precaution of increasing his column’s speed to fifteen knots and ordered General Quarters sounded on his flagship. Perhaps forgetting that he was a group commander and not simply the skipper of the Vincennes, he neglected to order the rest of his ships to go to battle stations.

When searchlights subsequently illuminated all three American cruisers, Riefkohl, believing they originated from Crutchley’s group, sent a TBS message requesting that they be extinguished.52 A minute later (0151) the three cruisers came under heavy fire. Now convinced that battle was upon him, Riefkohl radioed for fire to be returned on the searchlights and for the destroyers to attack. But since none of the other vessels were at General Quarters, it would take time before this order could be carried out.

The Japanese, of course, were not going to wait for their adversary to get ready. After opening fire, Mikawa’s gunners needed only a couple of salvos to find the range. They struck the Quincy almost immediately, and hit the other two heavy cruisers soon thereafter. In a minute, all three vessels had raging topside fires.53 The American cruisers were able to respond with only a few rounds before their ships became dead in the water.

51 Ibid.
52 Morison, Struggle for Guadalcanal, 47.
53 Chester E. Carroll, USS Helm Action Report, August 12, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 14, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
The battle ended by 0230. Struck by multiple torpedoes, the *Vincennes* and *Quincy* capsized within a few minutes of each other around 0245. Although the *Astoria* and *Canberra* remained afloat all night, neither could be saved. The crews abandoned both ships the next day. The *Chicago*, though crippled by torpedo damage, managed to limp away to the south. For good measure, one of Mikawa’s ships heavily damaged the picket destroyer *Ralph Talbot* with gunfire as it headed home.

With all three of Riefkohl’s cruisers afire as the Japanese ships exited Savo Sound, Mikawa knew he had achieved a tremendous victory. But the American transports had yet to be assailed. The commander and his staff assembled for a quick assessment of the situation. Although his ships retained about 60 percent of their ammunition and about half their torpedoes, Mikawa decided to forgo an attack on the enemy cargo vessels. Not only did he fear a morning air strike against his retiring vessels if he did not head for home soon (he was unaware that the U.S. carriers had already departed the area), but his operations room had been wrecked by one of the two American shells that struck his force. Mikawa did not like the idea of renewing the battle without his charts and the key personnel killed in the blast. In addition, he reasoned (correctly) that the American amphibious fleet would have to withdraw from Savo Sound now that its screen had been decimated. Lastly, before Mikawa had departed Rabaul 17th Army commander Lieutenant General Harukichi Hyakutake (whose forces were currently engaged against MacArthur’s forces in New Guinea) had assured the admiral that it would be relatively easy for his troops to expel the American garrison, grossly

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54 Ohmae, “Savo Island,” 1275.


56 *USSBS*, 2:472.
underestimated to consist of about 1,000 men.\(^{57}\) (In actuality, the Marines had landed 10,900 men on Guadalcanal and over 6,100 on Tulagi.) With these considerations in mind, Mikawa ordered his forces to withdraw. This blunder granted the Marines a temporary reprieve and gave them time to ensconce themselves around the soon-to-be completed airfield. Nevertheless, with the loss of three American (and one Australian) heavy cruisers and the crippling of another, the U.S. Navy suffered its worst defeat at sea, a record that stood throughout the war. The battle demonstrated that the U.S. Navy had a lot to learn if it wished to confront its enemy at night.

**Assessment of the Battle**

U.S. Navy regulations stated that the captain of a warship engaged in action with the enemy was required to submit a report of the encounter. These reports were sent up the chain of command, first to the task force commander (Turner), then onward to the theater commanders (Ghormley and Nimitz) and finally to the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet (King). Because Ghormley’s staff was relatively small, it concerned itself mostly with the summation of events taking place in the South Pacific. Nimitz and King, on the other hand, maintained staffs sufficiently large to thoroughly evaluate the battles being fought by the navy. By early 1943 the headquarters of both Nimitz and King had established departments whose primary purpose was to analyze the reports emanating from the fighting forces. (Since these new organizations became operational after the

\(^{57}\) Yasuji Watanabe (Combined Fleet Staff Officer) put the number of Americans on Guadalcanal between 800 and 1,000; *USSBS*, 1:68. Matome Ugaki said that information from the Chief of Operations Bureau indicated that the 1,000 or so enemy troops on Guadalcanal intended to withdraw after destroying the airfield; Matome Ugaki, *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 184. Toshikazu Ohmae claimed the 17th Army commanders were confident that they could expel the “meager American forces” on Guadalcanal; Ohmae, “Savo Island,” 1269.
conclusion of the Guadalcanal naval campaign, an examination of their structure will be discussed in chapter three of this dissertation.)

Not surprisingly, the battle reports submitted to Ghormley and Nimitz by the captains involved in this encounter in Savo Sound were not encouraging. Even the usual uncertainties associated with nighttime warfare could not hide the fact that the Allied force had been thoroughly trounced. A few days after the battle Crutchley wrote that “the enemy skill at night fighting, despite the general belief to the contrary, was shown to be of the highest orders.”

In his preliminary report to King, Nimitz wrote on August 23 that the Japanese

have demonstrated again that an inferior naval force lead (sic) with boldness and resolution can undertake night attack against a superior naval force with good prospects of success. It is hoped that we will profit by their example and in the future turn against them the lessons they have so ably taught us.

Less charitable toward his enemy, Admiral Turner pointed out that the U.S. Navy was unpracticed in the art of surface warfare. In response to an inquiry conducted in early 1943, Turner wrote that since the beginning of the war U.S. warships had been employed mostly as convoy escorts in the Atlantic and as screens for aircraft carriers in the Pacific. The long months of anti-submarine and anti-aircraft warfare had precluded training for surface encounters, especially at night. He noted that the heavy cruisers Vincennes and Quincy had only recently arrived from the Atlantic Fleet, where neither had conducted target practices nor exercises at night for at least fifteen months. Indeed, Turner wrote that virtually none of the vessels comprising Task Force 62 had engaged in

58 Victor Crutchley, Action Report, August, 11, 1942, 4, Record Group 38, Box 1727, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

59 CINCPAC Report, August 23, 1942, 12.
nocturnal exercises since the start of the war. Worse still, only Crutchley’s cruiser group
(Australia, Canberra and Chicago) had ever operated together prior to Operation
Watchtower. The rest had been plucked from a variety of naval divisions from the
Atlantic and Pacific Fleets.

The severity of the defeat in Savo Sound had prompted Ghormley to send Nimitz
a preliminary account of the debacle on August 16. When more details of the battle
became available, Ghormley submitted a follow-up report to King and Nimitz one month
later. In the latter report he was critical of Crutchley’s pre-battle instructions issued to his
ship captains, which he rightly pointed out were vague and contained no specific courses
of action to be taken in the event of a nighttime engagement with a surface force. He
lamented the rushed nature of the operation, which did not give Crutchley the opportunity
to confer with his skippers for the purposes of indoctrination. (As a part of MacArthur’s
naval forces in the Southwest Pacific on loan to the South Pacific, Crutchley had not even
met the skippers of the three heavy cruisers led by Riefkohl.) He also criticized those
skippers who ignored the significance of unidentified aircraft overhead and believed that
it had been wrong to rely solely on radar to detect the approach of the enemy. (The
latter mistake is not surprising since senior officers had recently predicted that that advent
of radar spelled the end of surprise nighttime torpedo attacks.) While these criticisms

60 Richmond K. Turner, as submitted to Arthur Hepburn, Report of the informal inquiry into the
Canberra, on August 9, 1942, in the vicinity of Savo Island (Solomon Islands). May 13, 1943, 44-45.
Record Group 38, Box 1727, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

61 Robert L. Ghormley, Commander South Pacific Area and South Pacific Force Report, October
17, 1942, 4, Record Group 38, Box 28, National Archives II, College Park, MD

62 Gilbert C. Hoover, Destroyer Squadron 2 Confidential Report, July 17, 1942, 1. Record Group
313, Commander Destroyers, Pacific, Box 9, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
were valid, Ghormley neglected to state exactly how his subordinates should have behaved differently. Perhaps this was just as well since one day after he wrote this report Nimitz (who believed Ghormley was exhibiting signs of defeatism) relieved him of his command. In his stead Nimitz appointed the aggressive Vice Admiral William “Bull” Halsey as the new South Pacific commander on October 18, 1942. The change instantly invigorated the troops and sailors defending Guadalcanal.

On December 7, 1942, Nimitz submitted his follow-up report on the engagement to King. (As had been the case with Ghormley, the scale of the defeat in Savo Sound had prompted Nimitz to submit a preliminary report to King.) After a thorough examination of the battle reports, Nimitz concluded that the defeat was attributable to two primary factors – surprise and fatigue. Task Force 62 was caught off-guard because it had placed too much faith in the ability of the picket destroyers’ radar scopes to detect an approaching enemy. The pickets were both too few in number and too close to the invasion area to be of much use. And he stated that radar “cannot be depended upon to replace alert visual lookouts,” especially in “areas with high land background.”⁶³ He neglected to point out that Crutchley’s ignorance of radar technology had resulted in its misuse. In the spring of 1942 the U.S. Navy had made a significant breakthrough with the introduction of the SG type radar set, a precursor of today’s machines. While the horizontal display of “waving grass” on the older SC screen necessitated extensive operator manipulation and interpretation, the newer SG sets required little user input. Its circular scopes pinpointed contacts in relation to the mother ship in an easy-to-read format. If effectively exploited, the new technology could radically alter the nature of

⁶³ Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, December 7, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 1727, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
nighttime sea warfare. In 1942, however, the electronic marvel was still a closely
guarded secret and its capabilities were not well understood by most of the navy’s senior
officers, Crutchley included. Only one ship in his command possessed an SG scope, the
light cruiser San Juan. But Crutchley had foolishly deployed this ship in the eastern
entrance to Savo Sound, where a surface clash was unlikely. He did this because he
believed the San Juan’s light armor made it less suitable for a surface action.64 Crutchley
failed to realize that the San Juan’s electronic endowment made this ship his most
formidable asset in any nighttime encounter. Had the San Juan been deployed as a
sentinel (rather than a rear guard), the outcome of the battle would likely have been
different. Unfortunately for the United States, Crutchley would not be the last flag
officer who failed to comprehend the significance of SG radar.

Besides condemning reliance on radar, Nimitz failed to recognize that the poor
performance of the Blue’s lookouts may have been the result of a deficient prewar
training program. Unlike the U.S. Navy, the Imperial Japanese Navy placed great
emphasis on the lookout function. The Japanese recruited exceptionally keen-eyed
sailors to man their observation stations, equipped them with the world’s finest
binoculars and drilled them vigorously at sea. On American warships, even moderately
good binoculars were still in short supply. Furthermore, in the last year of peace the navy
made no effort to train its sailors in nighttime observation, except as initiated by
individual commanders. Although U.S. Navy regulations stipulated that all lookout
personnel should be familiar with the physical characteristics and silhouettes of enemy
vessels, American sentries spent most of their time learning to locate and identify aircraft

64 Ibid., 29.
in daylight, not warships by starlight, like Japanese seamen. Interestingly, in late September 1941 units of the Pacific Fleet conducted the first nighttime test of its new “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” doctrine by pitting two small forces against one another. Although generally satisfied with the results of this practice, Pacific Fleet Commander Husband Kimmel cautiously noted that

The ease with which destroyer scouts penetrated the screen (of the opposing force)…clearly demonstrated that additional intensive training of lookouts must be diligently prosecuted, and total dependence can not be placed on radar detection.

Unfortunately for the navy, its neglect of nighttime warfare in the prewar years was painfully felt at Savo.

Fatigue, the other cause of the debacle according to Nimitz, was another problem encountered by the navy on this night. He realized that the crews of Task Force 62 had grown weary from the naval bombardments, anti-aircraft actions and constant searches for enemy submarines, which had kept them at General Quarters (Condition I) for most of this time. Consequently, by nightfall of August 8 the captains had set Condition II (heightened alert status, but most of the crew not at battle stations) to provide the men with much needed rest. Thus, when the Japanese arrived, Mikawa’s ships pummeled the Allied cruisers before their crews could man their guns. To prevent a reoccurrence, Nimitz created a new readiness status called Condition I – Easy. Under this state of readiness all men would be at their battle stations, but would be at ease. They could be

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66 Husband Kimmel, Pacific Fleet Confidential Notice 17CN-41, Enclosure A, October 22, 1941, 2, Command File, World War II, Box 245, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.

served meals and sleep at their stations. Put into effect whenever action was considered probable during nighttime cruising, this condition would neither delay the opening of gunfire nor would it exhaust the crews unduly.

Nimitz also addressed the problem of the many fires triggered by Japanese shells and torpedoes. He concluded that the vast conflagrations reported by the heavy cruisers were due, in part, to the large amount of flammable materials on board, a consequence of the many years of peacetime cruising. Ironically, about ten days before the clash at Savo, the lessons of the Coral Sea and Midway air battles had prompted Nimitz to issue a fleet-wide directive ordering the removal (or reduction) of unnecessary combustibles, including gasoline, alcohol, papers, canvas, cordage, paint and fueled observation aircraft from combatant ships.68 Four days after the Savo battle, he sent another memorandum iterating the need to eliminate the many layers of flammable paint that had accumulated on the bulkheads over the years. Two months later, he issued his most comprehensive directive in which he ordered all paint (except one primer coat), linoleum, stuffed furniture and unnecessary office files and naval stores removed. He ended by reminding his officers that these procedures are “extremely important to (the) military effectiveness of our ships.”69 Over the next weeks and months crews went to work tearing up their floor tiles and scraping the bulkheads down to the bare metal. In the battles that followed, these measures would help control the outbreak of fires, saving ships that might otherwise have been lost.


In December 1942, two weeks after receiving Nimitz’s final report on the Battle of Savo Island, King decided that the extent of the defeat was sufficient to warrant a full-fledged investigation. He therefore ordered the officially retired Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn to report to Nimitz and proceed to the South Pacific to conduct an inquiry. Hepburn, who had served as the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet before the war, was currently employed as the chairman of the navy’s General Board. His instructions were to determine the exact cause or causes of the disaster in Savo Sound and to ascertain whether any individuals involved in the operation were derelict in their duties.\(^70\)

After interviewing dozens of witnesses and combing the various headquarters for all relevant material (which led to the discovery of Crutchley’s unread battle report in the files of MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific command), Hepburn submitted his findings to Nimitz and King in May 1943. The exhaustive report provided an excellent analysis of all the events that had transpired on the night of August 8-9. Hepburn agreed with most of Ghormley’s and Nimitz’s earlier criticisms, such as the inadequate picket line and the failure of vital communications to reach Crutchley and Turner. He summed up his report by stating that the failure at Savo was due primarily to surprise rather than negligence on the part of any officer. The enemy achieved this surprise due to an “inadequate condition of readiness on all ships to meet a sudden night attack,” the “failure to recognize the implications of enemy planes in the vicinity previous to the attack,” a “misplaced confidence in the capabilities of radar installations on Ralph Talbot and Blue” and a “failure in communications which resulted in lack of timely receipt of vital enemy

\(^{70}\) Ernest King, Letter to the Secretary of the Navy, September 14, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 1727, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
When Nimitz read the report, he concluded that in the navy’s first major surface action since the Spanish-American War, the fleet was not sufficiently “battle minded.” It remained to be seen whether it could shake off its peacetime mentality and recover from its nighttime baptism of fire.

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72 Chester Nimitz, 1st Endorsement of Adm. A. J. Hepburn Report, undated, 2. Record Group 38, Box 1727, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
CHAPTER TWO
THE STRUGGLE FOR GUADALCANAL

With his carrier air support gone and five of his six heavy cruisers sunk or damaged, Admiral Turner had no choice but to withdraw his transports from Guadalcanal and Tulagi at dusk on August 9. Despite efforts to put ashore as much cargo as possible, Turner left with all the 1st Marine Division’s heavy artillery, land mines, radar equipment and camouflage netting still aboard.\footnote{Adrian Stewart, \textit{Guadalcanal: World War II’s Fiercest Naval Campaign} (London: William Kimber, 1985), 44.} In addition, all but eighteen spools of barbed wire, all heavy construction equipment except one bulldozer, most of the Marines’ ammunition and about half their food supplies remained in the cargo holds as Task Force 62 departed with the setting sun.\footnote{Ibid.} The navy abandoned 10,900 Marines on Guadalcanal and 6,100 on Tulagi with little more than three and five days’ worth of ammunition, respectively.\footnote{Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, August 23, 1942, 9.} Even with captured Japanese rice, the Marines possessed only about a month’s supply of food, provided they ate moderately and only twice a day.\footnote{Stewart, \textit{Guadalcanal}, 44.}

Despite the vulnerability of the Marines, the Japanese responded slowly. With their intelligence service estimating about 1,000 enemy troops on Guadalcanal, the Japanese believed they would have no difficulty driving the invaders out, if indeed the Americans intended to stay at all.\footnote{Ugaki, \textit{Fading Victory}, 184.} Consequently they made plans to send only a 2,000-man infantry regiment under Colonel Kiyoano Ichiki to Guadalcanal to recapture the
airfield. On the night of August 18-19, eleven destroyers delivered the first 900 men to Taivu Point, twenty-two miles east of the airstrip.\(^6\) Without waiting for the navy to convey his second echelon or artillery, the overconfident Ichiki launched a poorly conceived frontal assault against the more numerous Marines on the night of August 20-21. After repulsing Ichiki’s attack, the Marines outflanked his remaining men and annihilated the detachment.

Marine morale soared, both from this victory and from the arrival of a small shipment of supplies on August 20. That same day nineteen Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters and twelve Douglas Dauntless SBD dive bombers from the escort carrier *Long Island* touched down on Guadalcanal’s airfield.\(^7\) With the runway completed and re-christened Henderson Field, in memory of an American flier killed at Midway, the “Cactus Air Force” was born. (“Cactus” was the American codename for Guadalcanal.) From this point on, American air power over Guadalcanal made it hazardous for Japanese warships to approach the island during the daylight hours.

In late August the Japanese initiated a second attempt to win back the airstrip, again with too few troops. For Operation KA, as it was called, much of the Combined Fleet sortied in order to protect the shipment of a mere 1,500 men and to bring the U. S. Pacific Fleet to battle.\(^8\) The American navy accepted the challenge, resulting in the war’s third naval-air clash, the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, on August 24. The Japanese lost a light carrier in exchange for inflicting damage on the fleet carrier *Enterprise*. The next day, the troop convoy turned back after Henderson Field dive bombers sank the

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\(^6\) Stewart, *Guadalcanal*, 49.

\(^7\) Morison, *Struggle for Guadalcanal*, 73

\(^8\) Ibid., 80.
primary transport vessel, the *Kinryu Maru*. Recognizing the danger posed by U.S. air power, the Japanese shipped the convoy’s surviving troops to Guadalcanal via nightly destroyer runs, where exposure to air attack was confined to dusk and dawn strikes on the way in and on the way out of the island. The frequency of these destroyer runs prompted the Americans to refer to these operations as the “Tokyo Express.”

In the last week of August and the first week of September, the Japanese continued to ferry men and supplies to Guadalcanal in this manner. In addition to delivering the rest of the surviving troops from the August 25 convoy, the Japanese shuttled the 3,000-plus men of Major General Kiyotaki Kawaguchi’s 35th Infantry Brigade to Guadalcanal.9 On the nights of September 12-13 and 13-14, approximately 2,500 of Japan’s 6,200 soldiers on the island assaulted the southern face of the Marine perimeter.10 (Although the 17th Army staff estimated that Henderson Field was protected by 2,000 men, the airstrip was actually surrounded by about 12,000 Marines.11) To the north, the Combined Fleet went to sea and awaited word of the airfield’s capture. Once this was accomplished, the navy planned to descend on Guadalcanal and provide the Japanese soldiers with fire support against the fleeing Marines and to intercept and destroy any American vessels coming to the rescue. Unfortunately for the Japanese, Kawaguchi’s men failed to capture Henderson Field, forcing the navy to return to its base at Truk.

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10 Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 218 and 231.

11 Ibid., 218.
Nevertheless, the Japanese scored a couple of notable successes at sea. On the night of August 21-22, the destroyer *Kawakaze* encountered the destroyers *Blue* and *Henley* in Savo Sound. At 0355 the *Blue*’s radar scope registered a “pip” off the starboard beam at the same time that its listening gear picked up the sound of high speed propellers on the same bearing. Although the *Blue*’s skipper ordered his guns and torpedo tubes trained outward to starboard, he maintained his course and speed while awaiting identification of the contact. Four minutes later the *Blue*’s lookouts sighted several torpedoes approaching from the starboard quarter. Within seconds one of them struck the destroyer near the stern, mortally damaging it. At the time of the explosion the still unseen *Kawakaze* was already retiring to the north. Since the enemy vessel had not been sighted, the skippers of the *Blue* and *Henley* attributed the sinking to a Japanese torpedo boat. In their reports, Turner and Nimitz excoriated the *Blue*’s captain for remaining passive for four minutes following contact. For Turner, this failure to be proactive in the presence of the enemy was reminiscent of the Savo encounter two weeks earlier.

On August 31, a Japanese submarine damaged the aircraft carrier *Saratoga* and the battleship *North Carolina* (removing both from the theater of operations), while another sank the carrier *Wasp* two weeks later. The Americans could only console themselves with events on land. Not only had Kawaguchi’s attack been repulsed, but on September 18 a six-transport convoy landed the 4,000 men of the 7th Marine Regiment and an artillery battalion at Lunga Point (the river delta that served as the Americans’

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12 H. N. Williams, Action Report, August 25, 1942, 2-3. Record Group 38, Box 71, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
point of disembarkation). Including troops recently brought over from Tulagi, Vandegrift now had 19,000 men protecting Henderson Field.\textsuperscript{13}

Scott Crosses the “T”

On August 31, the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters finally awoke to the danger of the American challenge in the lower Solomons. Relegating operations in New Guinea to secondary importance, the high command decreed that the 17th Army’s primary objective was now the immediate recapture of Guadalcanal.\textsuperscript{14} Toward this end, General Hyakutake ordered Lieutenant General Masao Maruyama’s elite 2nd (or Sendai) Division transferred from Java to Guadalcanal. The plan was for this unit to recapture Guadalcanal’s airfield in mid-October in a major operation conducted in cooperation with the navy. In early October a couple of seaplane carriers and half a dozen destroyers began shuttling the leading elements of the 2nd Division to Guadalcanal in nightly runs, prior to the main body’s delivery in six high-speed transports scheduled for the night of October 14-15.

Aware of Japanese efforts to reinforce their garrison on Guadalcanal, South Pacific Commander Ghormley made plans to buttress Vandegrift’s 1st Marine Division with the 2,800 soldiers of the Americal Division’s 164th Infantry Regiment. This unit departed Noumea (the harbor at New Caledonia and the location of Ghormley’s headquarters) on October 9 in a convoy of ships commanded by Admiral Turner. To protect these transports and converted destroyers, Ghormley deployed three battle groups. One was built around the aircraft carrier \textit{Hornet}, operating 180 miles southwest of

\textsuperscript{13} Stewart, \textit{Guadalcanal}, 73-74; Frank, Guadalcanal, 251-252.

\textsuperscript{14} Stewart, \textit{Guadalcanal}, 75.
Henderson Field; another around the new battleship Washington, operating fifty miles east of Malaita Island; and a third cruiser-destroyer force (Task Group 64.2) under Rear Admiral Norman Scott, patrolling south of Guadalcanal. It was this last group that would soon see action.

Scott’s force included the heavy cruisers San Francisco and Salt Lake City, the light cruisers Boise and Helena, and the destroyers Farenholt, Duncan, Laffey, Buchanan and McCalla. These ships had departed Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides (the navy’s anchorage nearest to Guadalcanal) on October 7 and arrived at their assigned area two days later. Patrolling just beyond the range of Japanese reconnaissance aircraft, Task Group 64.2 was ideally located to steam rapidly toward Guadalcanal should an enemy force approach the island. After two uneventful days, American scouts sighted the enemy on October 11. Although heavy air attacks by Japan’s 11th Air Fleet successfully pre-occupied the Cactus Air Force, Rear Admiral Aubrey Fitch’s Flying Fortresses from Espiritu Santo made three successive contacts, reporting two enemy cruisers and six destroyers coming down the “Slot” – the channel running down the middle of the Solomon Islands archipelago. (Fitch had replaced McCain on September 20 as commander of the South Pacific’s air forces.) Upon receipt of these messages, Scott proceeded north to intercept, estimating his opponent’s arrival to be around 2300.

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16 Norman Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, October 22, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 17, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

17 Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, December 26, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 19, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

18 Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 1.
Unknown to Scott two Japanese forces were en route to Guadalcanal this night. The Reinforcement Group, under Rear Admiral Takaji Joshima, carried heavy equipment and soldiers from the 2nd Division in two seaplane carriers and six destroyers. This was the group that Fitch’s pilots had spotted. Although these airmen had correctly identified the six destroyers present, they had mistaken the two seaplane carriers for cruisers.

The Bombardment Group, under Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto, followed Joshima by about two hours. This force comprised two destroyers and the three heavy cruisers of Cruiser Division 6. Mikawa’s growing irritation with the Cactus Air Force’s dawn and dusk attacks on the nightly destroyer runs had prompted him to send Goto to shell Henderson Field. Because the Americans had yet to challenge the Imperial Japanese Navy at night since the Battle of Savo Island two months earlier, Goto believed he would encounter no opposition during his mission. He therefore confidently allowed Joshima’s group to precede his own.

Scott had been present (though unengaged) at the Battle of Savo Island. His examination of the reports from that battle and a pre-sailing conference with Ghormley convinced him of the need to ensure against being taken by surprise. Consequently, as the sun went down on October 11, Scott ordered all his ships to sound General Quarters. To reduce the fire hazard aboard his ships, he instructed the crews to jettison all flammable topside items, including depth charges. He had also ordered all but one float plane from each cruiser flown off to Tulagi the day before. As his ships steamed up the

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19 Frank, Guadalcanal, 296.
20 Dull, Battle History, 216.
21 Ernest G. Small, USS Salt Lake City Action Report, October 19, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 1390, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
western side of Guadalcanal, he signaled for the cruisers to launch their last aircraft. Unfortunately for Scott, these scouts would enjoy less success than their Japanese counterparts did two months ago. Failing to receive the launch order, the Helena’s Captain Gilbert C. Hoover ordered his plane thrown overboard.\textsuperscript{22} The Boise’s aircraft experienced engine trouble shortly after being catapulted and was forced to land.\textsuperscript{23} And the Salt Lake City’s plane erupted into a fireball at takeoff.\textsuperscript{24} Not only did this leave Scott with just one aerial observer, but the flaming float plane threatened to reveal his presence to the Japanese.

Fortunately for Scott, his force had not yet cleared the tip of Guadalcanal’s Cape Esperance at the time of the accident.\textsuperscript{25} As a result, Joshima’s vessels, which were just arriving at their disembarkation points, could not see the fire.\textsuperscript{26}

Goto, however, did see the distant flash, despite passing through a series of rain squalls. Like the American commanders two months previously, Goto did not recognize this as a sign of the enemy’s presence. Believing the far away light to be emanating from Joshima’s vessels, Goto attempted to signal his colleague, but received no reply.\textsuperscript{27} Apparently unconcerned with this development, Goto sailed on, still confident that no American vessels would interfere with his planned bombardment.\textsuperscript{28} Joshima added to

\textsuperscript{22} Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 1.
\textsuperscript{23} Edward J. Moran, USS Boise Action Report, October 30, 1942, 3, Record Group 38, Box 1025, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
\textsuperscript{24} Small, Salt Lake City Action Report, 4.
\textsuperscript{25} Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, Navigational Track Chart, unpaged.
\textsuperscript{26} Frank, Guadalcanal, 298.
\textsuperscript{27} USSBS, 2:456.
\textsuperscript{28} Morison, Struggle for Guadalcanal, 152-153.
Goto’s insouciance by radioing at 2220 that Savo Sound was clear of enemy ships and by neglecting to inform him that one of his lookouts had sighted a float plane at 2245.  

This reconnaissance plane, Scott’s only scout, radioed that one large and two small vessels were off Guadalcanal’s northern beach. (Joshima’s vessels had split and were disembarking supplies at various points.) This report perplexed Scott. Perhaps because the composition of the reported units to his south did not match his expectations, he speculated that the ships might be friendly. He chose to continue his patrol, believing that his quarry would appear from the north.

Having miscalculated his enemy’s arrival by nearly an hour (probably due to an inaccurate estimate of Joshima’s speed by Fitch’s pilots) and disinclined to believe that the ships reported by his airborne observer were Japanese, Scott missed the opportunity to strike Joshima’s Reinforcement Group. But by maintaining his station above Savo Island, Scott placed his force in an ideal position from which to ambush the unsuspecting Goto.

West of Savo Island, Scott’s single column of vessels turned to course 050 degrees (to the northeast) at 2310. Captain Robert G. Tobin, the commander of Destroyer Squadron 12 (comprising Scott’s five escorts), led the formation on the Farenholt. The destroyers Duncan and Laffey followed. The cruisers San Francisco (Scott’s flagship), Boise, Salt Lake City and Helena came next. The destroyers Buchanan and McCalla brought up the rear.

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29  Frank, Guadalcanal, 299.

30  Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 2.
The Battle of Cape Esperance
October 11-12, 1942

Map 3. The Battle of Cape Esperance
Goto’s five ships approached Savo Sound from the northwest. The heavy cruisers Aoba (flagship), Furutaka and Kinugasa steamed in column, while the destroyers Hatsuyuki and Fubuki cruised off the Aoba’s port and starboard beams, respectively. Unknown to Goto, Scott’s vessels stood between him and Henderson Field.

At 2325, the Helena’s advanced SG radar set picked up a contact to the northwest at a range of 27,700 yards. Incredibly, at about the same time, the Salt Lake City’s SC radar scope made a similar discovery. With false echoes relatively common, especially among the older sets, both ship captains hesitated to notify Scott until they were sure their “pips” were genuine.

Ten minutes later, with Savo Island coming up on his starboard beam, Scott (who had no idea the enemy was nearby) ordered his formation to execute a 180 degree column (i.e. “follow the leader”) turn to port. Captain Charles McMorris (located one deck below Scott on the San Francisco) misunderstood and ordered his helmsman to reverse course immediately. As the lead-ship Farenholt swung around, squadron commander Tobin and skipper Eugene Seaward were surprised to see the flagship turning inside their path. To avoid a collision, Seaward widened his turn, thereby positioning the three van destroyers off the starboard quarter of the southwesterly-heading cruisers and two rear destroyers.

As the Farenholt, Duncan and Laffey completed their elongated turns, the Duncan’s gunnery radar discovered a contact to the northwest. The ship’s skipper, Lieutenant Commander Edmund B. Taylor, erroneously assumed that the Farenholt had

31 Gilbert C. Hoover, USS Helena Action Report, October 20, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 1025, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
32 Small, Salt Lake City Action Report, 6.
turned wide because Tobin intended to lead the van destroyers in a torpedo attack against the enemy. Taylor therefore steered the Duncan to the northwest. Too late did he realize that the Duncan was heading for the enemy alone.

By now the Helena’s Captain Hoover was satisfied that his radar contact was for real. He radioed his finding to Scott at 2342.33 Two minutes later, Captain Edward J. Moran on the Boise (the only other ship equipped with SG radar) radioed that his vessel had detected “bogies” bearing 065 degrees, 295 degrees true.34

This message puzzled Scott. Having failed to receive Moran’s true bearing, only the 065 (relative) bearing, he had to contend with the possibility of two enemy formations.35 But Moran had also used the word “bogies,” which strictly speaking, meant unidentified aircraft, not ships. Therefore, this might not be his enemy at all.

Aware that his three van destroyers were no longer in front, Scott speculated that the starboard contact might very well be his own wayward escorts. Attempting to ascertain their whereabouts, he radioed squadron leader Tobin and asked him if he was taking station ahead. Tobin replied in the affirmative and said that he was coming up his starboard side.36

With Tobin’s destroyers on his right, Scott believed the radar contacts to the north were probably his own ships.37 Captains Hoover and Ernest G. Small (on the Salt Lake City) knew this was not true since their “pips” had registered prior to the course reversal.

33 Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 3.
34 Moran, Boise Action Report, 4.
35 Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 3.
36 Charles H. McMorris, USS San Francisco Action Report, October 31, 1942, TBS Transmissions, unpaged, Record Group 38, Box 1396, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
37 Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 3.
(The Helena’s radar was so sophisticated that it even discerned the “T” formation of Goto’s vessels.\textsuperscript{38} Moran, too, knew the truth since the Boise’s SG scope clearly distinguished the oncoming enemy ships from the displaced American destroyers.\textsuperscript{39}

On the bridges of the four American cruisers only Rear Admiral Scott and Captain McMorris on the San Francisco remained unsure of their enemy’s whereabouts. Mistakenly fearing that the Japanese fielded receivers capable of detecting the long-wave transmissions of the SC radar, Scott had previously ordered all SC radars (but not the micro-wave SG and fire control radars) turned off.\textsuperscript{40} (The Salt Lake City’s radar operated in defiance or in ignorance of this order.) With no search radar in use on the flagship, Scott did not know of Goto’s presence before his course reversal and remained skeptical of his presence after it.

With the range closing fast, Captain Hoover on the Helena finally radioed “Interrogatory roger, acknowledge please” at 2345, which was navy parlance for permission to open fire.\textsuperscript{41} While Scott had earlier instructed that his captains need not seek his approval to fire, Hoover nonetheless asked for it. After Hoover repeated his request, Scott, who mistakenly thought Hoover was simply verifying that his earlier TBS transmission had been received, replied “roger.”\textsuperscript{42}

Receiving what he thought was permission to fire, Hoover ordered his ship to commence firing at 2346. Having also tracked the target for some time, the Boise and

\textsuperscript{38} Hoover, Helena Action Report, 2.
\textsuperscript{39} Moran, Boise Action Report, 5.
\textsuperscript{40} McMorris, San Francisco Action Report, 11.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., TBS Transmissions, unpaged.
\textsuperscript{42} Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 3.
Salt Lake City already had their guns trained on Goto’s vessels when the Helena started shooting. Consequently, they opened fire immediately. The other American vessels quickly followed.

With the target bearing 100 degrees, relative (i.e., nearly perpendicular), and at a range of only 3,600 yards, Scott had unwittingly crossed his opponent’s “T” at point blank range.\(^43\) (“Crossing the T” is a classic naval maneuver. By sailing across an opponent’s line of advance, a commander can bring all his guns to bear against an enemy who can only reply with his forward guns.) No admiral could have asked for a better disposition. With American star shells bursting overhead, eight-, six- and five-inch projectiles plunged into Goto’s formation. The latter two batteries fired so rapidly that they resembled bursts of machine gun fire.\(^44\) Unfortunately, the bright flashes associated with this gunfire also blinded the captains and other topside personnel.\(^45\)

Having just emerged from another squall, Goto was unaware of his opponent until his lookouts spotted the American column less than a minute before the Helena initiated the action.\(^46\) With his ships’ guns still trained in and his crews not at battle stations, Goto, like Captain Riefkohl before him at the Battle of Savo Island, refused to believe that an engagement was at hand.\(^47\) He was convinced that the gunfire directed at his

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\(^{45}\) Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 6.


ships emanated from Joshima’s Reinforcement Group. Consequently, he withheld his fire and frantically signaled “I am Aoba.” For the next six or seven minutes, Goto’s guns remained quiet.

Having caught his opponent in the most unenviable position possible, Scott nearly threw away his advantage. With no radar contacts of his own (his fire control radars, poorly suited for searching, still showed no “pips”), he thought he might be firing on his own destroyers, which were in fact between his column and Goto’s vessels. One minute after the Helena opened fire, Scott ordered a cease fire. He then queried Tobin, “How are you?” When Tobin replied that he was alright, Scott asked if the cruisers were firing at his squadron. After Tobin answered that his ship was not being fired upon, Scott dithered more, asking him who was the target of the American gunfire. Tobin replied that he did not know.

Not until Tobin’s destroyers flashed their recognition lights did Scott finally order a resumption of fire. Scott had squandered four precious minutes hesitating to commit to battle. Fortunately for the Americans, the volume of fire slackened, but never ceased entirely. Of course, with his flag on the San Francisco, Scott made sure that half of Task Group 64.2’s eight-inch guns were silenced immediately.

48 USSBS, 2:456.
49 Ugaki, Fading Victory, 237.
50 Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, December 26, 1942, 6.
51 Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 3.
52 McMorris, San Francisco Action Report, TBS Transmissions, unpaged.
53 Eugene T. Seaward, USS Farenholt Action Report, October 20, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 980, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
54 Frank, Guadalcanal, 302.
Unable to halt the gunfire off his bows by signaling his identity, Goto ordered a 180 degree column turn to starboard. By failing to order a simultaneous turn, Goto offered the American gunners an easy target when the second cruiser in column, the Furutaka, continued toward the American line a while longer, then pivoted and reversed course in the same spot as the Aoba had done.\textsuperscript{55} The Americans pummeled the cruiser with gunfire, along with the destroyer Fubuki, which sank before completing its turn.\textsuperscript{56} The third cruiser in line, the Kinugasa, as well as the destroyer Hatsuyuki, turned to port, away from their southwesterly-heading adversaries, thereby avoiding any damaging hits.

With Goto’s ships in full retreat to the northwest, Scott ordered a cease fire at midnight and directed his ships to flash recognition lights and reform. After changing course to the northwest, Scott ordered firing resumed at 0011. With the Furutaka and Fubuki sinking and the Aoba nearly wrecked topside, the Kinugasa defended the task group’s honor and fought back aggressively.

After narrowly avoiding several torpedoes, the Boise foolishly turned on its searchlight. Attracting the attention of the Kinugasa’s gunners, the Boise received ten or eleven hits of various calibers, causing immense damage. One eight-inch shell exploded in the light cruiser’s forward magazine, causing intense fires and widespread flooding. Captain Moran later reported that his adversary “straddled us repeatedly… shooting beautifully with twin eight-inch mounts.”\textsuperscript{57} Captain McMorris on the unscathed San Francisco also credited the Japanese with very accurate gunfire in the battle’s final

\textsuperscript{55} Dull, \textit{Battle History}, 219.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{USSBS}, 2:456.

\textsuperscript{57} Moran, \textit{Boise Action Report}, 1, 8.
phase.\textsuperscript{58} As for the listing Boise, Japanese shells disabled all three forward turrets.\textsuperscript{59}

With his ship’s bow low in the water, Moran decided to steer the Boise away from the action.

Captain Small conned the Salt Lake City to starboard to interpose his vessel between the stricken Boise and the retiring enemy. Illuminated by the flaming Boise to port, the Salt Lake City received two eight-inch shells from the Kinugasa. The blasts disabled a boiler room, started a fire and caused several compartments to flood.\textsuperscript{60}

By 0027, with his opponent disappearing into the darkness and concerned that the rearward ships might mistake the forward ones for the enemy, Scott called off the chase and ordered a retirement.\textsuperscript{61} Task Group 64.2 reformed at the pre-designated rendezvous point and headed back to Espiritu Santo. Scott had lost the destroyer Duncan (which had been pounded by friend and foe after it broke formation to make a torpedo run) but had sunk the Japanese destroyer Fubuki and the heavy cruiser Furutaka. Of those ships that returned to base, the Aoba and Boise incurred severe damage, while the Kinugasa, Salt Lake City and Farenholt received lesser injuries.

The next morning Joshima directed three of his destroyers to rescue Japanese survivors from the Furutaka and Fubuki. Dive bombers and torpedo planes from Henderson Field attacked and sank two of them before the day ended.

\textsuperscript{58} McMorris, San Francisco Action Report, 10.
\textsuperscript{59} Moran, Boise Action Report, 11.
\textsuperscript{60} Small, Salt Lake City Action Report, 1, 16.
\textsuperscript{61} Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 4.
Assessment of the Battle

The U.S. victory at the Battle of Cape Esperance (as it was called) was a major boost to American morale. Based on the battle reports submitted by Scott and his captains, Nimitz reckoned that Task Group 64.2 had sunk three Japanese cruisers and five destroyers. In light of this assessment, Nimitz wrote that “we administered as severe a defeat to them as they did to us in the earlier battle” and declared that with the same advantage of surprise as the Japanese had enjoyed on the night of August 8-9, “our light forces are equal or superior.”\textsuperscript{62} (Ironically, only six days before writing this, Nimitz had distributed a fleet letter cautioning his sea commanders to be wary of exaggerated claims.\textsuperscript{63}) The reality, of course, was that the damage inflicted by the Japanese in the first battle was far more extensive than that administered by the Americans in the second battle. With the surviving ships of both sides suffering roughly equal damage, the margin of victory for the United States was one sunken Japanese cruiser. Nevertheless, the encounter illustrated the progress the U.S. Navy had made in its endeavors to rectify the errors of the first battle. Scott, for example, had sent his crews to General Quarters around dusk, allowing the crews plenty of time to get ready without unduly exhausting them before the battle. Scott had also instructed his vessels to remove their topside flammables, including aircraft. Lastly, he had intercepted the enemy outside of Savo Sound in order to maximize the effectiveness of his radars and prohibit the enemy from concealing himself against any land background.

\textsuperscript{62} Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, December 26, 1942, 6. Record Group 38, Box 19, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{63} Chester Nimitz, Pacific Fleet Secret Letter No. 1SL-42, December 20, 1942, 1, Command File, World War II, Box 234, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
Of course the performance of Task Group 64.2 was not flawless by any means. Although Scott had been drilling part of his force in nocturnal exercises since September, a few weeks of nighttime training could not make up for years of neglect. The poorly executed course reversal just prior to the battle, the confusion associated with the double meaning of “roger” and the reporting of “bogies” with a relative bearing all demonstrated the U.S. Navy’s lack of proficiency in combat operations.

Although defeats tend to be more instructive than victories, the U.S. naval leadership deserves credit for recognizing many of its shortcomings and implementing corrective measures. In his post-battle report, Destroyer Squadron 12’s Commander Tobin recommended that warships be equipped with an auxiliary set of battery-powered recognition lights (since the Farenholt’s had been shot away during the battle), that the dual meaning of the word “roger” be eliminated and that when a column of warships changes course 120 degrees or more, the van and rear destroyers switch locations to allow the formation to acquire its new heading more expeditiously. However, Tobin made no mention of the fact that his vessels had not undertaken their primary task – a coordinated torpedo attack.

On December 26, 1942, Nimitz submitted his report of the battle to Admiral King and sent copies to various task force and divisional commanders in the South Pacific. In addition to implementing new procedures based on Tobin’s suggestions, Nimitz declared that henceforth radar contacts must be transmitted to the officer in tactical command (OTC) without delay and that all contact information should be given in true (not relative) bearings only. In addition, the word “skunk” was introduced into the navy’s

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64 Robert G. Tobin, Action Report, October 23, 1942, 4-5, Record Group 38, Box 600, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
A lexicon to be used when referring to an enemy ship, with the name “bogie” to be used to designate an enemy plane.

Noting that the two U.S. ships suffering the most damage (the Boise and Salt Lake City) were the ones that had employed searchlights, Nimitz cautioned against their use. Prewar doctrine stipulated that because star shells took up to two minutes to become effective, ships should first illuminate the enemy with searchlights. But experience now showed that turning on a searchlight acted like a beacon and attracted enemy gunfire. Therefore Nimitz stated that they should not be used, except at very short ranges and only for brief intervals.

These changes quickly became standard operating procedures among U.S. Navy task forces. But perhaps the most important of Nimitz’s criticisms would remain unaddressed for nearly ten months after the Battle of Cape Esperance. Despite his overall praise for Scott and his victory, Nimitz perceptively noted that half the task force’s power had been underutilized. The victory had been achieved with gunfire alone, especially from the light cruisers’ rapid six-inch caliber rifles. Of the 25 torpedoes carried by Tobin’s destroyers that night, only seven had been fired (two from the Duncan and five from the Buchanan), none of which struck a target. By contrast, four of the five Allied cruisers present at the Battle of Savo Island had been hit by at least one torpedo. Nimitz wrote that the destroyers of Task Group 64.2 “do not appear to have been employed to the limit of their combined capabilities,” adding that “their disposition in such close

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67 Frank, Guadalcanal, 297, 304.
proximity to and in a single long column with the cruisers is questionable.” ⁶⁸ Nimitz concluded that if Scott had employed one of the formations developed during peacetime for nighttime engagements, there would have been less confusion and a greater application of combat power.

Nimitz was referring to the “V” and “Wedge” formations described in the 1941 “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” doctrine. In the former, a division of cruisers split into two columns led a squadron of destroyers. In the latter, a single column of cruisers led the destroyers. These two formations were designed to permit a torpedo strike against a well-defended enemy battle line. In both cases the cruisers would blast a hole in the enemy’s screen of ships, through which the following destroyers would penetrate and torpedo the exposed battleships.

Scott, however, rejected the “V” and “Wedge” formations. Not only were these more complicated formations difficult to maintain by inexperienced crews in ships assembled from various divisions, but his opponent was not a heavily screened line of battleships. It made little sense for Scott to employ his cruisers as a battering ram if there was no rampart (except a destroyer on each flank) to smash through.

Since the navy lacked a doctrine for light forces engaging enemy light forces alone, Scott was forced to improvise. His solution was to adopt a single column formation, which he later claimed to be the “most practical for night action.” ⁶⁹ Although he did not say so, this disposition was an adaptation of the navy’s daytime fleet action deployment, which entailed a line of battleships protected by cruisers and destroyers

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⁶⁸ Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, December 26, 1942, 6.

⁶⁹ Scott, Task Group 64.2 Action Report, 2.
positioned to the front and rear, on the engaged side. Scott simply arrayed his cruisers into a battle line with his destroyers divided between the front and rear. (He probably placed his destroyers in line with his cruisers, rather than to one side, either to simplify maneuvering or because he was unsure of which flank his opponent would appear.)

Although this formation maximized the effectiveness of Scott’s heavy guns, it was not conducive for torpedo fire. In a fleet action U.S. doctrine stated that destroyers in the outer screen were to peel away from their stations and execute a torpedo strike on the enemy battle line (with any available cruisers leading the way). Destroyers and cruisers on the inner screen were to stay behind and shield the battle line from enemy attempts to do the same. At Cape Esperance, Scott gave no order (nor did he indicate any such intention in his battle plan) for his destroyers to leave the battle line to conduct such an attack. Instead, the destroyers were instructed beforehand to simply fire torpedoes at large ships and employ guns against destroyers, presumably from their stations.70 Only the skipper of the destroyer Duncan, in a mistaken assumption, broke formation to make a torpedo run.

Although Scott only had five destroyers available, his decision to keep them all tied to the battle line for defensive purposes was faulty. If his intention was to use them defensively, his excessive caution deprived him of a more definitive victory. If he intended for his destroyers to employ their torpedo batteries to their maximum effectiveness, fettering them to his cruisers violated naval doctrine. Destroyers used for

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70 Norman Scott, Memorandum for Task Group 64.2, October 9, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 239, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
offensive purposes, it said, should be “oriented with respect to the enemy objective, and not in a fixed area relative to own battleline.”

In March 1943 Admiral King completed his analysis of the battle. Much of the report reiterated earlier criticisms and mentioned mistakes that had since been corrected. But his most significant observation dealt with Scott’s failure to employ his destroyers more effectively. In agreement with Nimitz, King wrote that the “disposition where destroyers were divided was more defensive than offensive. Could not the destroyers have been formed into striking groups to attack the enemy from the flank with torpedoes and/or make a torpedo attack on enemy ships close inshore?” Seeking to determine why the now deceased Scott had not done this, he added “Or was it more desirable to keep concentrated in order not to inadvertently have own cruisers firing at own destroyers retiring from torpedo attack…?” King wrote that “careful study of Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5TB-42 (Nimitz’s November 14, 1942 revision of the navy’s nighttime doctrine) is indicated.”

The invocation of Tactical Bulletin 5TB-42 is somewhat strange since the assumptions inherent in this document do not apply to this battle (or those that followed). After all, U.S. Navy doctrine (including Tactical Bulletin 5TB-42) held that destroyers should be used to attack enemy battleships (or to help defend one’s own), while cruisers are best suited to attacking light forces. This is what Scott had done. Since Goto’s

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71 Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine, United States Fleet, 1941, 30, Command File, World War II, Box 270, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.

72 Ernest King, Battle Experience, Solomon Island Actions, October 1942, March 15, 1943, Chapter 20, 6, Record Group 334, Box 443, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

force contained no battleships (which aerial reconnaissance had made clear prior to the battle), he used the guns of his cruisers to attack the enemy’s light forces, keeping his destroyers close by to repel possible enemy destroyer torpedo attacks on his “battle line.” Since doctrine also stated that destroyer torpedoes should generally be reserved for use against capital ships, Scott was acting in accordance with established procedures.  

Nimitz and King neglected to admit that the policy of reserving torpedoes for use against battleships (or aircraft carriers) only was foolish and needed to be changed. They also missed a chance to emphasize their point by neglecting to address the Duncan’s attempt to launch a preliminary torpedo attack against the enemy flank. The skipper of this destroyer did exactly what Nimitz implied and what King said should have been done, yet neither admiral praised or even mentioned this action.

Besides Scott’s underemployment of his destroyers, King wrote that Scott’s selection of the San Francisco as flagship resulted in unnecessary confusion in the battle’s opening minutes. Since this vessel lacked an SG radar scope, Scott had to rely on the Helena and Boise to supply him with vital information, some of which was misunderstood in transmission. Had Scott had his flag in either of the light cruisers, he would have been aware of the enemy’s presence earlier and would have been able to distinguish the oncoming enemy from his wayward destroyers. (This error on Scott’s part is somewhat unforgivable given that he had been embarked on the San Juan at the Battle of Savo Island, the one vessel in the entire force equipped with SG radar. Thus, Scott should have been familiar with the device and been aware of how much more advanced it was compared to the SC radar.) In the future, said King, commanders should

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74 War Instructions, United States Navy, 1934, 43.
place their flag in a vessel equipped with the more modern radar. They should also be sure to maintain a clear plot of both enemy and friendly forces.\footnote{King, Battle Experience, October 1942, March 15, 1943, Chapter 20, 8-11.} Events would later demonstrate that the failure to perform this function adequately would plague U.S. task forces.

Although the success at Cape Esperance provided a needed tonic to American confidence following the humiliation at Savo Sound, the victory had a baneful influence on the conduct of future operations. Subsequent commanders endeavored to replicate Scott’s success by mimicking his tactics. But his methods were flawed, and they had worked only because he had fought under unusual circumstances. Since the Battle of Savo Island the U.S. Navy had virtually abdicated control of the nighttime seas around Guadalcanal to the Japanese. Consequently, the American navy’s sudden reappearance after a prolonged absence caught Goto off guard. Scott also benefited from the fact that the presence of two Japanese forces caused his opponent to withhold his fire for several crucial minutes. And except for the Kinugasa’s single spread late in the battle, the Japanese had not employed their favorite nighttime weapon – the torpedo. Such a situation was not likely to be repeated now that the U.S. Navy had demonstrated its newfound willingness to challenge the Japanese for control of the nighttime waters in the southern Solomon Islands.

Moreover, under the belief that the Battle of Cape Esperance was a smashing (rather than a marginal) success, many U.S. flag officers viewed Scott’s employment of gunfire at the virtual exclusion of torpedo fire as a vindication of their prewar notions that the gun was the final arbiter in naval combat. (Proponents of this view conveniently
forgot that three of the four cruisers sunk at the Battle of Savo Island had been struck by torpedoes). Scott’s conduct at Cape Esperance certainly demonstrated his allegiance to this school of thought. And he was not alone in this belief.

Ironically, it was the skipper of the destroyer *McCalla* who helped perpetuate this cult of the gun when he declared that the factor that contributed most to the victory at Cape Esperance, besides the element of surprise, was the “high rate of fire maintained by our forces, particularly the 6 inch gun cruisers.”\(^7\) South Pacific Commander Halsey (who succeeded Ghormley six days after this battle) was so impressed with the results of these rapid-firing guns, that he wrote that the use of continuous fire (as opposed to the more carefully aimed salvo fire), should be made standard procedure when firing in full radar control.\(^7\) But by concentrating on tactics designed to maximize the effectiveness of gunfire, the U.S. naval leadership ignored the potential of the torpedo, in terms of its offensive capabilities and as a potent force to be reckon with in the hands of a capable enemy. Events would show that it would take many more battles before the misconceptions derived from the Battle of Cape Esperance were dispelled.

**Aftermath of Cape Esperance**

Events moved swiftly after the Battle of Cape Esperance. With both sides determined to prevail on Guadalcanal, each made efforts to secure an advantage. The day after Scott’s victory, four PT (patrol torpedo) boats entered Tulagi’s small harbor. The

\(^7\) William G. Cooper, USS *McCalla* Action Report, October 12, 1942, 3, Record Group 38, Box 22, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\(^7\) William Halsey, Commander South Pacific, Second Endorsement of USS *McCalla* Action Report, January 8, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 22, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
next day Turner arrived with the army’s 164th Infantry Regiment and supplies for Vandegrift.

That night the Japanese re-asserted their control of the nighttime seas by sending a task force built around the fast battleships *Kongo* and *Haruna* to bombard Henderson Field. With screening destroyers easily driving off the U.S. torpedo boats that attempted to intervene, the Japanese battleships fired nearly a thousand fourteen-inch high-explosive shells against the Marine positions. The ferocious bombardment temporarily grounded the Cactus Air Force, allowing the Japanese to deliver the 2nd Division to Guadalcanal. With these additional troops 17th Army commander Hyakutake, who had recently re-located to Guadalcanal to direct the upcoming attack personally, put his men in motion in preparation for the major army-navy operation to recapture Henderson Field.

The difficulties the Japanese soldiers encountered in their march through Guadalcanal’s nearly impenetrable jungle forced Hyakutake to postpone the date of the attack several times, much to the irritation of the naval leadership. Having been at sea since October 11, the Combined Fleet was consuming vast amounts of precious oil waiting for its sister service to begin its attack. Informed that fuel considerations would force the navy to return to base shortly, Hyakutake prematurely began his long-awaited offensive against the American perimeter on the night of October 24-25. With poor coordination among the attacking units and without waiting for all the troops to arrive, the Japanese struck the south face of the American perimeter. Although the Japanese made a few penetrations, the Marines successfully repulsed the assault. However, an overoptimistic Japanese observer erroneously claimed to have seen some of the attackers

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78 Dull, *Battle History*, 224.
reach the airfield. Without waiting for confirmation, Hyakutake radioed the navy that the airstrip had been captured, putting the Combined Fleet in motion. The resulting naval-air clash became known as the Battle of Santa Cruz.

In this carrier battle Japanese torpedo and dive bombers damaged the Enterprise yet again and mortally wounded the Hornet, which had to be scuttled. In exchange, American pilots damaged one large and one small carrier, leaving the Imperial Navy with one fleet carrier and two medium-sized converted carriers undamaged (only one of which was still operational). Tactically, this was a Japanese victory. But the U.S. forces had thwarted Japan’s efforts to capture Henderson Field. Moreover, the Japanese paid a high price for their success in destroying the Hornet. American fighters and anti-aircraft guns killed many of the Imperial Navy’s remaining veteran aviators. Sixty-nine Japanese pilots and seventy-four crewmen died in the battle, compared to American fatalities of fourteen pilots and seven crewmen. As a result, Japan’s two remaining fleet carriers and one light carrier returned to the home islands to begin rebuilding the air crews. Japan’s Pyrrhic victory at Santa Cruz insured that its onetime omnipotent carrier air fleet would never again play a meaningful role in the remaining struggle for the Solomon Islands.

The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, Part One (Nov. 12-13)

Despite their failure in October, the Japanese prepared yet another operation to seize the elusive prize of Henderson Field. Although the Japanese did not know that they had achieved numerical parity in troop strength on Guadalcanal, they correctly perceived

79 Frank, Guadalcanal, 354.
80 Ibid., 602.
that their assault on the Marine perimeter had been close to success. They therefore made plans to deliver the 38th Division to Guadalcanal in mid-November and the 51st Division and a mixed brigade in December. (The 38th Division had originally been slated to go to New Guinea, but the seriousness of the situation in the lower Solomons prompted a change in plans.) “Tokyo Express” runs in early November delivered the first elements of the division, increasing Japanese manpower on Guadalcanal to 30,000 by November 10. To expedite this reinforcement, the Japanese assembled eleven transports at Shortland Island (Japan’s primary naval base in the northern Solomons) and prepared to embark the main body of the 38th Division. This convoy, escorted by the twelve destroyers of Rear Admiral Raizo Tanaka’s Destroyer Squadron 2, planned to arrive off Guadalcanal on the night of November 13-14.

To safeguard this shipment, the 11th Air Fleet prepared to conduct an intensive assault against Henderson Field beginning on November 10. The night before the convoy’s arrival, a battleship group commanded by Rear Admiral Hiroaki Abe would bombard the American airstrip, followed by a cruiser barrage the next night by the 8th Fleet under Admiral Mikawa (the victor of the Battle of Savo Island). With the subsequent delivery of the 51st Division and 21st Mixed Brigade, the Japanese high command believed that its overwhelming superiority on the ground would almost certainly assure their capture of Henderson Field in late December.

During this period the Americans were also busy delivering food, fuel and ammunition to their forces on Guadalcanal. The most important reinforcements came

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81 USSBS, 2:468.

82 Dull, Battle History, 238.
from two convoys leaving from Noumea and Espiritu Santo. Admiral Turner led the former with four transports on November 8. Admiral Ghormley’s former chief of staff, Rear Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan, provided an escort with the heavy cruisers _San Francisco_ and _Portland_, light cruiser _Helena_, anti-aircraft light cruiser _Juneau_ and ten destroyers. Aboard the anti-aircraft light cruiser _Atlanta_, Admiral Scott, with four destroyers, escorted three cargo ships from Espiritu Santo on November 9. Altogether, these seven transports contained provisions, equipment and about 6,000 soldiers and Marines, which would boost Vandegrift’s troop strength to 29,000 men, nearly matching the Japanese contingent on Guadalcanal.\(^83\)

Scott’s group arrived off Lunga Point on November 11, followed by Turner’s the next morning. In an attempt to destroy these provisions while still in their holds, Japan’s 11th Air Fleet launched strikes on the 11\(^{th}\) and 12\(^{th}\), but failed to inflict any significant damage on the U.S. vessels. By dusk on the 12\(^{th}\) all the troops and 90 percent of the supplies had been put ashore before the combined task groups retired back to base.\(^84\)

For most of these warships the withdrawal to the south was only temporary. Earlier in the day a reconnaissance pilot had reported seeing a large Japanese surface unit in the “Slot” heading toward Guadalcanal. Turner had surmised that the approaching force intended either to attack his vessels or to repeat the devastating October 13-14 battleship bombardment of Henderson Field to clear the way for a major Japanese reinforcement of the island. To thwart the latter scheme Turner denuded his escorting warship screen and detached the heavy cruisers _San Francisco_ and _Portland_, light cruiser

\(^{83}\) Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, February 18, 1943, 6, Record Group 38, Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.; Dull, _Battle History_, 238.

Helena, anti-aircraft light cruisers Atlanta and Juneau and eight destroyers. He ordered Admiral Callaghan in the San Francisco to take charge of this force, named Task Group 67.4, and return to Savo Sound to intercept the enemy and prevent the bombardment of Henderson Field. (Unfortunately for the United States, Callaghan, who had only gone to sea at the end of October after being Ghormley’s chief of staff, was senior to the more experienced Scott, who had been the victor at the Battle of Cape Esperance and had been at sea for nearly six months.)

The Japanese were indeed bearing down on Guadalcanal with a formidable surface force intent on pounding Henderson Field and the Cactus Air Force. The Japanese bombardment force, under the command of Admiral Abe, comprised two battleships – the Hiei and Kirishima. These were screened by Rear Admiral Satsuma Kimura’s Destroyer Squadron 10, which included the light cruiser Nagara and six destroyers. The Nagara led the two battleships in column, with three destroyers arrayed on each flank in an arrow-head formation. En route to Guadalcanal, the five destroyers of Rear Admiral Tamotsu Takama’s Destroyer Squadron 4 joined Abe’s force to act as an advanced scout. Abe directed the destroyers Asagumo (Takama’s flagship), Murasame and Samidare to patrol six to nine miles off the main body’s starboard bow and the destroyers Yudachi and Harusame to do the same off the port side.85 Abe believed that this disposition would prevent his main body from being surprised by an enemy surface force, as had happened to Goto at Cape Esperance.

Despite his precautions, Abe did not expect to see any American vessels on this night. The Imperial Navy still dominated the nighttime waters around Guadalcanal and,

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85 Frank, Guadalcanal, 438.
except at the Battle of Cape Esperance, the United States Navy had not seriously challenged this preeminence. Although Abe had received reports from aerial scouts and an island observer that there were American transports and warships off Lunga Point, these same informants told him that all the American vessels had retired to the south at sunset, as usual. These observers, however, failed to detect Task Group 67.4’s return to Savo Sound after midnight. Thus, like Goto before him, Abe made preparations to carry out a barrage against Henderson Field, unaware that his enemy was nearby.

As Abe’s force sailed southward, a severe thunderstorm developed and engulfed his fleet. With visibility almost nil and the seaplane base at Rekata Bay reporting that it would be impossible to provide aerial spotters for the bombarding warships, Abe reversed course, intending to postpone his assignment to another night. However, subsequent clearing and a positive report of conditions at Guadalcanal prompted the admiral to reverse course again at 0038 and reinstate the mission.

Unknown to Abe, the vessels of Destroyer Squadron 4 had become confused in the storm and found themselves to the rear of the main body after the second course reversal. With visibility still poor (though improving), the skippers of Destroyer Squadron 4 had no idea of their position vis-à-vis the main body when Abe radioed for them to sweep ahead into Savo Sound at 0046. ⁸⁶

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⁸⁶ Ibid., 437.
The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal
November 12-13, 1942

Map 4. The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (Part One)
Seeing the Japanese signal lights on Cape Esperance at 0125, Abe ordered his southbound formation to parallel the northern coast of Guadalcanal. Five minutes later, a Japanese spotter on Guadalcanal reported that Savo Sound was clear of ships and aircraft. With still no word from his vanguard destroyers, Abe was now satisfied that Savo Sound was empty of enemy vessels. At 0130 he radioed the command: “Gun battle. Target airfield.”87 Ammunition hoists in the *Hiei* and *Kirishima* began loading special high-explosive fragmentation shells into the breeches of the fourteen-inch guns. Although these projectiles were unsuitable against armored warships, they could cause immense destruction against parked aircraft and land installations.

The Japanese, of course, were not alone. Callaghan’s thirteen-ship column had come up from the south and reentered Savo Sound via the eastern entrance, hugging the Guadalcanal coast on a westerly heading. At 0130, as Abe’s observer on Guadalcanal radioed that all was clear, Callaghan’s vessels steamed past Henderson Field and the Matanikau River delta, near the western edge of the Marine defensive perimeter.88 Evidently, the Japanese observer on Guadalcanal was situated on Cape Esperance rather than near the front line where he could not have missed the silhouette of Callaghan’s long line of ships just offshore.

Not only was Abe’s spotter misplaced, but his Destroyer Squadron 4 was in disarray. Takama, leading the three starboard-side scouts, began to get his bearings about the time Abe radioed his 0130 order designating Henderson Field as the target. Still in the rear, Takama led his three destroyers toward the main body’s port quarter. He

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87 Ibid.

planned to race up its left side and resume his assigned position out front. At this time, Takama queried the *Yudachi* as to its whereabouts. The destroyer’s skipper replied that he was just off the starboard bow of the battleships, not the six to nine miles off the port bow as originally directed. Although now aware of just how far out of position his squadron was, Takama neglected to inform Abe of this or the fact that the forward reconnaissance of Savo Sound had not been carried out.89 With his scouts and land-based observer having failed him, the Japanese commander entered Savo Sound ill-prepared for a surface action.

Having been fortunate to catch his adversary unawares, Callaghan proceeded to throw away his advantage through a series of mistakes, bad decisions and poor management of his forces. Admittedly, the group Callaghan commanded was not a practiced team. Having assumed command of the *San Francisco* only two weeks ago, Callaghan had not had much opportunity to train with many of the vessels now under his command. But the admiral worsened his predicament by neglecting to issue a battle plan to his captains or even inform them of the situation they were likely to face.90

Callaghan also misread a couple of the lessons from the victory at Cape Esperance. He duplicated Scott’s single column formation, failing to realize, as Nimitz had, that victory had been achieved in spite of this disposition, not because of it. Callaghan arrayed his ships in a column as follows: the destroyers *Cushing, Laffey, Sterett* and *O’Bannon*, followed by the cruisers *Atlanta, San Francisco, Portland, Helena* and *Juneau*, with the destroyers *Aaron Ward, Barton, Monssen* and *Fletcher* bringing up

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the rear. While this configuration facilitated communication and control, a big advantage considering the hodgepodge of vessels comprising Task Group 67.4, it limited the offensive potential of the destroyers, especially the four Callaghan deployed in the rear.

Callaghan also repeated Scott’s error of failing to place his flag in an SG radar-equipped ship. With three of the five cruisers and two of the eight destroyers possessing the new sets, it seems odd that the admiral selected the SC radar-accoutered *San Francisco* as his flagship. (The *Atlanta*, in which Scott was embarked, also lacked a modern scope.) As the former skipper of the *San Francisco*, Callaghan may have allowed sentiment to influence his selection. Or he may simply have been ignorant of the advantages offered by SG radar since the admiral neglected to deploy a destroyer outfitted with SG radar in the van of his column, where it would be most effective. The vessel nearest the front with a modern scope was the destroyer *O’Bannon*, which was fourth in line. Callaghan placed the *Fletcher*, his other SG radar-endowed destroyer, last in line. Among the cruisers, Callaghan deployed the two rigged with SC radar ahead of the three equipped with the newer models. Compounding these errors, Callaghan ordered all SC radars turned off prior to battle.\(^{91}\) Like Scott before him, Callaghan feared that the Japanese might be using receivers capable of detecting SC radar emissions. (As it turned out, the Japanese would not employ such devices until after the Solomons campaign.)\(^{92}\) Consequently, Callaghan would be as in the dark as Scott had been in the previous encounter.

\(^{91}\) Herbert E. Schonland, USS *San Francisco* Action Report, November 16, 1942, 63, Record Group 38, Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

Unlike Abe, the American admiral knew it was only a matter of time before his adversary appeared. Afternoon reports had informed Callaghan that two forces were coming down the “Slot,” one composed of two battleships or heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and six destroyers, and another with five destroyers.\(^93\) (Takama’s Destroyer Squadron 4 had not yet joined Abe’s main body.) Except for the uncertainty of the identity of the two largest ships, the American scouts furnished Callaghan with accurate intelligence for the upcoming encounter.

After Task Group 67.4 reentered Savo Sound, the *Helena* informed Callaghan at 0124 that its radar had picked up a contact 27,100 yards to the northwest.\(^94\) A minute later, the *Helena*’s “pip” separated into three, with the strongest signal emanating from the middle, suggesting a core unit flanked by an escorting group. Before long, the *O’Bannon* broadcast a similar contact report. At 0130 Callaghan ordered his force to change course from 280 to 310 degrees, toward his opponent. With the range closing fast, the American admiral queried those captains with access to SG radars for updated information on the continually changing situation. The single TBS channel quickly became overloaded when numerous procedural transmissions of low import cluttered the radio frequency. This excessive chatter slowed Callaghan’s receipt of the information he desperately needed.

Fortunately for the Americans, the Japanese were not monitoring Task Group 67.4’s TBS circuit and therefore had no idea of their enemy’s presence.\(^95\) But with his

\(^93\) Ibid., 1.

\(^94\) Gilbert C. Hoover, USS *Helena* Action Report, November 15, 1942, 4, Record Group 38, Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\(^95\) Morison, *Struggle for Guadalcanal*, 240.
own SC radar turned off, Callaghan found himself reliant on others for information that arrived only intermittently. The absence of an SG scope on the flagship now made itself felt. Delays in receiving contact updates held up the admiral’s countermoves. Not until 0137 did Callaghan order a course change to due north (000 degrees). But the new heading would not take the American column across the Japanese bow, as Callaghan intended, but put Task Group 67.4 on a collision course with Abe’s vessels.

With guns trained on the enemy, officers aboard the leading ships waited impatiently for Callaghan to give the order to fire. With the range continuing to drop, the bridge personnel of the Cushing spotted the Yudachi and Harusame crossing their bow from left to right less than 3,000 yards away at 0141. The Cushing’s skipper quickly wheeled his ship left, both to avoid a crash and to unmask his torpedo batteries. This unexpected maneuver caused a ripple effect in the American column, throwing it into disorder as ships made emergency maneuvers to avoid collisions. Callaghan radioed for his vessels in front to resume the northward heading, forcing the Cushing to abandon its torpedo attack.

The sight of American warships came as a shock to Abe. His formation was still in a cruising disposition and the turrets of his battleships were loaded with bombardment ammunition. He ordered his formation to bear to the left and instructed his ammunition handlers to retrieve armor-piercing shells from the magazines.

While the battleship crewmen sought out the appropriate ordnance, the leading American vessels were waiting to fire, but Callaghan delayed. He frittered away precious

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96 Schonland, San Francisco Action Report, 63.
minutes trying to reform his column, by now a hopeless task. At 0145, as the van of Task Group 67.4 began to pierce the Japanese formation, Callaghan radioed “Stand by to fire.”

But the battle was not going to wait for the American admiral. Around 0148 Abe ordered his flagship to turn on its searchlight to provide illumination for his ships’ gunners. The Akatsuki and light cruiser Nagara did the same, even though the close proximity of the opposing forces did not require this. The Japanese beams of light settled on the anti-aircraft light cruiser Atlanta, whose mast and superstructure towered above the four destroyers preceding it. In self defense the Atlanta’s Captain Samuel Jenkins ordered his ship to fire into the lights. This brought a nearly instant response from the Japanese.

Just as this exchange of gunfire erupted, Callaghan finally gave the order to fire, radioing for the odd-numbered ships to fire to starboard and the even ones to port.97 Although Japanese vessels were, by now, on both bows of Task Group 67.4, many American ships had been tracking a particular opponent for some time. When some of these turned out to be on the “wrong” side, firing was delayed further until new targets could be acquired on the opposite side.98

The Atlanta’s battle with the Hiei and some of its screening ships was brief. After only two minutes, thirty-two shells, from five-inch to fourteen-inch in caliber, had pounded the lightly armored ship, setting it afire and killing Admiral Scott and most of his staff.99 One or two Japanese torpedoes also struck the ship, rendering it dead in the

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97 Laurance T. DuBose, USS Portland Action Report, November 21, 1942, 3, Record Group 38, Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.


water. As the ship drifted to port, it moved into the San Francisco’s line of fire. A couple of salvos from the flagship slammed into the Atlanta’s upper works, prompting Callaghan to radio “cease firing own ships.” Some ships complied while others (who were certain that they were firing on enemy vessels) did not. Seeking clarification, the Portland’s skipper queried “what is the dope, did you want to cease fire?” “Affirmative” responded Callaghan, but subsequently radioed “Give ’em hell! We want the big ones! Get the big ones first!”

These were the last instructions Callaghan gave. A few moments later both Japanese battleships targeted the San Francisco, plastering its upper works with fourteen- and six-inch shells. Fortunately for the U.S. flagship the Japanese battlewagons’ main batteries were still firing high-explosive bombardment ammunition. Although these projectiles cause significant damage topside, they failed to penetrate into the San Francisco’s vital regions. However, the Japanese fusillade wrecked the ship’s superstructure and upper decks, killing most of the bridge personnel, including the ship’s skipper and Admiral Callaghan.

The damage was not wholly one-sided. Having unnecessarily employed their searchlights, the Hiei and Akatsuki attracted the attention of American gunners and drew most of their fire. Fires soon erupted on both warships, a circumstance that attracted even more gunfire.

With the disorganized American vessels amidst the Japanese formation, the battle broke down into a ship-to-ship brawl. The encounter was reminiscent of the battles of

old, where wooden ships-of-the-line engaged in close quarter duels. With Callaghan
dead and the Hiei’s communications gear shot off, central control on both sides was lost.

A northwesterly running fight developed as the Hiei and Kirishima reversed
course to port, with various American ships in pursuit. Many other ships, on both sides,
steeled about in myriad directions, crossing each other’s paths with guns blazing.
Hundreds of rounds and many torpedoes crisscrossed the battle zone. The proximity of
the foes was such that guns sometimes could not depress sufficiently while torpedoes
occasionally thudded against hulls before they could arm themselves.\footnote{101}

Since the Kirishima turned inside the Hiei and made an early exit from the mêlée,
most of the American vessels targeted the Japanese flagship. Over two dozen eight-inch
and about seventy five-inch shells plastered the Hiei’s upper works, causing numerous
fires.\footnote{102} The battleship’s protective plating, however, prevented these small and medium
sized calibers from penetrating into the ship’s armored spaces. U.S. destroyers, of
course, possessed a weapon that could, potentially, deal the Hiei a lethal blow – i.e. their
torpedoes. Indeed, the destroyer’s primary offensive role in wartime was to employ its
torpedo batteries against battleships, if it could get close enough to do so. On this night,
the U.S. destroyers had come well within torpedo range even before the enemy had
become aware of their presence. Although no coordinated torpedo attack had been
planned or ordered by Callaghan, seven of the eight U.S. destroyers put a total of 49
torpedoes into the water, half of which were aimed at the Hiei.\footnote{103} But not one exploded

\footnote{101 Morison, Struggle for Guadalcanal, 245; Grace, Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, 85.}
\footnote{102 Grace, Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, 187.}
\footnote{103 Action Reports; Grace, Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, 90.}
against a Japanese hull. Although American post-battle reports claimed over two dozen hits, defective torpedoes precluded any successes.

On the Japanese side, their more reliable and more powerful torpedoes scored six times against five ships.\textsuperscript{104} And without a capital ship to concentrate on, Japanese gunners distributed their fire throughout Task Force 67.4, inflicting damage on most of the U.S. ships.

At 0226, with the Japanese vessels heading for the northern exits of Savo Sound, Captain Hoover on the \textit{Helena}, now the senior officer, radioed for all American ships to break off the action and withdraw to the east. The order brought to a close the war’s most ferocious surface battle.

Only five ships were able to join the \textit{Helena} in its retirement to Espiritu Santo. These included the \textit{San Francisco}, \textit{Juneau} and the destroyers \textit{Sterett}, \textit{O’Bannon} and \textit{Fletcher}. But not all of these would make it home. Later that morning a Japanese submarine fired a spread of torpedoes, one of which struck the \textit{Juneau}. The anti-aircraft light cruiser, which was apparently already suffering from a broken keel due to a torpedo hit from the prior night’s encounter, exploded into a huge cloud of debris. When the dust settled, the ship was gone, having disintegrated from the blast. The remaining vessels continued on, convinced that none of the ship’s crew could have survived such a catastrophe. Incredibly, over one hundred men made it into the water alive, but all but ten perished from wounds, exposure and sharks.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{104} Action Reports.

\textsuperscript{105} Frank, \textit{Guadalcanal}, 457-459.
Back in Savo Sound, dawn brought the realization of just how vicious the night battle had been. Seven ships, two Japanese and five American, lay stricken on that Friday morning, November 13. On the American side, destroyers Cushing and Monssen were burning and beyond salvage. There seemed to be hope of saving the Atlanta, but with the crew unable to control the flooding, it too was abandoned and went down. The destroyer Aaron Ward was in no danger of sinking, but having received nine shell hits it had lost all power and could do nothing except wait for help. The last U.S. ship, the heavy cruiser Portland, had been unable to retire from the battle zone due to a torpedo hit in that stern that had jammed its rudder, confining its movements to clockwise circles.

One of the two Japanese ships still in Savo Sound that morning was the destroyer Yudachi. Having steered into the American formation rather than away like most of Abe’s vessels, it had received a disproportionate share of American gunfire. Abandoned by its crew during the night, the smoking ship caught the attention of the Portland at daybreak. After the U.S. heavy cruiser fired a few salvos, one of its shells struck a magazine. The detonation blew the destroyer into the air, followed by its hasty plunge to the bottom.\(^{106}\)

The last ship in the area was Abe’s flagship, the battleship Hiei. Although it had been spared any torpedo hits, an eight-inch shell from the San Francisco had struck the ship’s stern below the waterline, jamming its rudder and flooding its steering compartment. Like the Portland, the Hiei could only steam in circles. And like the Portland, the Japanese flagship spotted a crippled enemy destroyer in the morning light and began firing at it. Fortunately for the crew of the Aaron Ward, they were spared the

\(^{106}\) E. W. Shanklin, USS Portland Action Report, November 19, 1942, 4 (Enclosure B), Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
fate of the *Yudachi*. Just as Japanese salvos began straddling the destroyer, providence intervened from the air. Hastily scrambled aircraft from Henderson Field arrived and began conducting strafing and bombing runs against the *Hiei*, distracting the Japanese behemoth, allowing a Tulagi-based tug boat the opportunity to tow the *Aaron Ward* and *Portland* to the safety of the harbor across the sound. The *Hiei*, meanwhile, was bombed and torpedoed throughout the day. By the afternoon, with the hope of salvage gone, the *Hiei*’s crew opened the Kingston valves and abandoned the ship.\(^{107}\) That night, the *Hiei* joined the growing list of victims resting on the floor of what was now nicknamed “Iron Bottom Sound.”

**Assessment of the Battle**

When Nimitz made his report of the November 12-13 battle to King at the end of December, he presented the engagement as a tactical victory, albeit with several flaws and missed opportunities. Based on the reports of the skippers present at the battle (and his own intelligence sources), he estimated that Task Group 67.4 had sunk three Japanese cruisers and five destroyers, as well as damaging two battleships (one later sunk by aircraft), two cruisers and three destroyers. He added that he believed no enemy ship escaped without damage.\(^{108}\) When compared with U.S. losses of one anti-aircraft light cruiser and four destroyers (and later the *Juneau*), it is understandable for Nimitz to see this as a victory, even though every U.S. ship except the destroyer *Fletcher* had incurred damage. But his estimates of Japanese losses were exaggerated. In fact, Callaghan’s ships had sunk only two destroyers (including the abandoned *Yudachi*) in the nighttime

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\(^{108}\) Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, December 28, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 19, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
mêlée. And (except for a minor hit on the Kirishima and Nagara) they succeeded in
damaging only four ships – the Hiei and three destroyers.\footnote{Grace, Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, 187.} Thus, the Americans lost the
Atlanta and twice as many destroyers as the Japanese and had only one or two ships fit
for action afterward compared to Abe’s eight. (In fact, six of Abe’s ships went to battle
again two nights later.)

In only one respect could the late Admiral Callaghan claim success – his
prevention of the Japanese bombardment of Henderson Field. In doing so, the Cactus Air
Force remained a potent weapon, one which would wreck the fleet transporting the 38th
Division the following day. This achievement notwithstanding, Callaghan had conducted
this sea battle poorly. His most glaring mistake was his failure to place his flag in a ship
equipped with SG radar. Repeating the error Scott had made at Cape Esperance,
Callaghan was unable to maneuver his task unit in a timely fashion, a mistake
unanimously criticized by Halsey, Nimitz, King and Naval War College President Pye.
This blunder, wrote King, was the primary reason that Task Group 67.4 forfeited the all-
important factor of surprise. He could not understand why Callaghan had not placed his
flag in the SG radar-equipped Helena. Moreover, King wrote that the destroyer squadron
commander (Captain Robert Tobin) should have been in the van (not in the Aaron Ward
with the rear destroyers) and in one of the two SG radar-equipped destroyers. Why
Callaghan had placed his two destroyers (the O’Bannon and Fletcher) with SG scopes
fourth and last in line was a mystery to King. The Command in Chief wrote that radar

\footnote{Grace, Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, 187.}
had provided the information necessary for an early commencement of fire without illumination.\textsuperscript{110} But Callaghan’s errors wasted this opportunity.

Perhaps Callaghan’s second biggest mistake was his failure to use his destroyers effectively. Nimitz, King and Pye all censured Callaghan for repeating Scott’s mistake of tying his destroyers to the cruiser (or battle) line.\textsuperscript{111} This arrangement, King wrote, unnecessarily exposed the destroyers to gunfire and prevented them from making a coordinated torpedo attack. He wrote that “we fail to … employ our ships for the function they were designed,” adding that

\begin{quote}
Destroyers are essentially an offensive weapon, particularly at night with their torpedo batteries. Destroyer gunfire at night is secondary to torpedoes.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

For King, the stationing of the two anti-aircraft light cruisers (the \textit{Atlanta} and \textit{Juneau}) in the battle line was also unsound. He wrote that these rapid-firing, lightly armored ships were designed to protect the battle line against air attack (and enemy destroyer attacks, he neglected to mention) and it was incumbent upon a task force commander to “recognize (the) functions of various types of ships and employ them properly.” King stated that the \textit{Atlanta} and \textit{Juneau} (which carried torpedoes, unlike other U.S. cruisers) should have been grouped together and led the rear destroyers in a torpedo attack against the enemy flank.\textsuperscript{113} (As the skipper of the \textit{Amatsukaze} later remarked,

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{110} Ernest King, \textit{Battle Experience}, Solomon Islands Actions, November 1942, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 11-12, 23, 28, Record Group 334, Box 443, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
\item\textsuperscript{111} Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, December 28, 1942, 8; William S. Pye, Comments on the Battle of Guadalcanal, June 5, 1943, 3, Papers of Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, Box 26, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; King, \textit{Battle Experience}, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 11.
\item\textsuperscript{112} King, \textit{Battle Experience}, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 11, 18, 37.
\item\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., Chapter 28, 11, 71.
\end{itemize}
Guadalcanal’s dark silhouette would have cloaked such an attack against Abe’s starboard side.\textsuperscript{114}

Of course, King would have preferred all the destroyers in the forefront. He wrote that

\begin{quote}
The four destroyers in the rear could have been more effectively employed in the van concentrated with the other destroyers prepared to make a high speed torpedo attack and retirement from the immediate vicinity of the action.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

In Callaghan’s defense, Nimitz’s and King’s criticisms of Scott’s destroyer deployment at the Battle of Cape Esperance were not written until December 1942 and March 1943, respectively. On the other hand, as Ghormley’s chief of staff, Callaghan would have been privy to the early reports of that action and should have been able to deduce for himself that Scott had underutilized his destroyers.

Nimitz was also dissatisfied with Callaghan’s deployment. Echoing his sentiments of the prior battle, Nimitz wrote that dividing the destroyers between van and rear positions, with the squadron commander in the rear group, “is open to question.”\textsuperscript{116} He also wondered why Callaghan did not employ the “V” or “Wedge” formations as called for in the doctrine. Of course, while these two dispositions did group the destroyers together, they also placed them \textit{behind} the cruisers, not in front.

Callaghan’s third major mistake was his failure to issue a battle plan, despite ample opportunity to do so. Two days before the battle Admiral Turner informed Callaghan that he intended to detach him with the bulk of the screening vessels to form a


\textsuperscript{115} King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 11.

\textsuperscript{116} Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, December 28, 1942, 8.
task unit to engage the enemy, who was expected to appear on the evening of November 11-12 or 12-13.\textsuperscript{117} Nimitz, King and Pye were all critical of Callaghan for neglecting to issue any instructions to the skippers of his task group. War College President Pye wrote that last minute orders like “‘Give them hell,’ ‘We want the big ones,’ make better newspaper headlines than they do battle plans.”\textsuperscript{118} Consequently, when contact was made, the captains were unsure what was expected of them or what Callaghan intended to do. This circumstance helped contribute to the delay in opening fire (which sacrificed the element of surprise) and the general confusion of the engagement. As it turned out, Callaghan’s primary battle instruction – directing odd ships to fire to starboard, even to port – was counterproductive for many vessels and merely highlighted the fact that Callaghan had blundered his way into the enemy’s crossfire.

Although King was critical of Callaghan for his failure to issue a battle plan, the Commander in Chief admitted that this oversight was exacerbated by the navy’s lack of a suitable nighttime battle doctrine. In this encounter the navy’s “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” plan (dating from December 1941) proved inadequate. King noted with regret that this document did not provide for destroyer leaders to conduct coordinated preliminary torpedo strikes on the enemy flank as soon as the adversary was detected.\textsuperscript{119} (The 1941 doctrine did not give destroyer leaders the authority to break away from the main body to initiate a torpedo attack at their discretion.\textsuperscript{120}) King also wrote

\textsuperscript{117} Turner, Letter of Instructions concerning the future operations of Task Force 67, November 10, 1942, 4-5, Record Group 38, Box 15, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{118} Pye, Comments on the Battle of Guadalcanal, June 5, 1943, 4.

\textsuperscript{119} King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 14, 15, 18, 31, 46, 48, 65.

\textsuperscript{120} William S. Pye, U.S. Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5-41, December 24, 1941, 18, Command File, World War II, Box 250, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
that skippers should be authorized to shoot once within effective range and the firing solution has been solved. It should not be necessary, he said, for ship captains to seek permission from the task force commander before carrying out these actions. They should be undertaken automatically.121

Curiously, King concluded his March 1943 report by stating that future task force commanders should be well-versed in the concepts contained in Tactical Bulletin No. 5TB-42.122 (This was an updated version of “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” issued by Nimitz on November 14, 1942.) But this new doctrine neither placed the destroyers in the formation’s vanguard nor did it authorize the destroyer commander to initiate independent torpedo strikes at their discretion. King’s endorsement of this document is therefore difficult to understand given its limited improvement of the original doctrine.

Post-battle assessment of this encounter illustrated just how clumsy Callaghan’s handling of Task Group 67.4 had been. He repeated many of the mistakes of his predecessors – “even exaggerated them” said Pye – and gave orders (such as his “odd/even” command) that perplexed Nimitz.123 Callaghan’s conduct was so poor that one historian of the campaign went so far as to assert that the extent of his blunders might well have prompted his court-martial had he not been killed in the engagement.124 Yet, despite their criticisms, neither Nimitz nor King questioned the decision to put Callaghan

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121 King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 65-66.

122 Ibid., Chapter 28, 52, 70.


124 Stewart, Guadalcanal, 124.
in command of this task unit. Only Pye did. Writing in June 1943 (after another dismal performance by a task force commander at the end November), Pye stated that as individual ships, the U.S. Navy had performed admirably. He also believed that command at the highest echelons (i.e. SOPAC, CINCPAC and COMINCH) had likewise been commendable. But at the sea command level, Pye wrote that the navy often failed to put its most qualified flag officers in charge. He wrote that successful admirals required “experience in command and a knowledge of strategy and tactics acquired by study as well as by practical experience.”\textsuperscript{125} Clearly, Pye was lamenting the fact that Callaghan had been placed in charge of Task Group 67.4 instead of the experienced and successful Scott, who had nothing to do once his task unit had been appended to Callaghan’s. As Pye saw it, it was regrettable that so many experienced flag officers remained ashore while younger, greener commanders went to sea.

Not only did the navy need to do a better job of getting the most qualified admirals into sea commands, but it needed to keep them there long enough to indoctrinate their subordinates. Both Pye and King commented upon the problem of high turnover among unit commanders.\textsuperscript{126} Callaghan had been at sea only two weeks when this engagement occurred. In the two subsequent encounters that month, the flag officer had been in command of his unit for only a matter of days. King and Pye realized that the navy needed to allow commanders the time to thoroughly train their charges before those squadrons could be expected to operate effectively.

\textsuperscript{125} Pye, Comments on the Battle of Guadalcanal, June 5, 1943, 6.

\textsuperscript{126} Pye, Comments on the Battle of Guadalcanal, June 5, 1943, 5; King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 70.
Although the navy repeated several of the mistakes committed in the last battle, it had avoided others. For example, unlike several Japanese ships, none of Callaghan’s vessels employed searchlights. Although Nimitz’s admonition against their use at the Battle of Cape Esperance would not be made until December, informal discussions at Espiritu Santo made it clear that the *Boise* had been pummeled immediately after switching on its searchlight. In his report to the fleet the following March, King reiterated the warning made by the skipper of the *O’Bannon* that the use of searchlights tended to attract accurate enemy gunfire. He also endorsed the conclusion of the *Helena*’s Captain Gilbert Hoover that the “ideal method of night illumination” was the employment of fire control radars to achieve initial hits, which would spark fires that, in turn, would disclose the target and others nearby.\(^\text{127}\)

King was also pleased that most ships had refrained from the use of recognition lights until the end of the battle, when Captain Hoover had instructed them to be turned on to facilitate his corralling of the remaining force before retirement. One notable exception was the destroyer *Monsen*. After switching on its lights, a pair of Japanese searchlights settled on the ship, followed by a deluge of shells that left the vessel mortally wounded. In his analysis, the Commander in Chief wrote that “Flashing of recognition lights assists the enemy. Each time our ships have flashed recognition lights, the enemy has recognized them and opened fire.” He added that “A different identification system is badly needed.”\(^\text{128}\) For Nimitz and King, the solution to the problem was the installation of an electronic identification system. At this time Allied forces in Europe

\(^{127}\) King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 28, 52.  
\(^{128}\) Ibid., Chapter 28, 33, 40.
and the Pacific were beginning to introduce a system known as IFF – Identification, Friend or Foe – in aircraft. With this system a friendly plane detected by radar would transmit a particular signal to the radar station identifying it as friendly. Any aircraft which failed to send this response was assumed to be hostile. Writing in February and March of 1943, respectively, Nimitz and King stated the need to install IFF devices in the Pacific Fleet as soon as possible. Once in place, radar operators would be able to distinguish between hostile and friendly “pips.” This would prevent, said Nimitz, a reoccurrence of American ships withholding their fire due to the uncertain identity of the target. Although Nimitz wrote that efforts were underway to install an IFF system into the fleet, the Solomons campaign would end before it was put into place.129

Although the navy would be too slow to implement an IFF system, its prompt action in the field of damage control yielded tangible results in this encounter. The uncontrollable fires suffered at the Battle of Savo Island were largely absent on the night of November 12-13. The removal of unnecessary inflammables and intensive drilling in damage control helped save some of the ships of Task Group 67.4. The Aaron Ward, for instance, suffered nine hits, including three fourteen-inch shells (albeit with instant fuses), yet suffered no major fires. The San Francisco endured forty-five hits, which sparked twenty-five separate fires. But all of these were quickly contained, leading the senior surviving bridge officer to write that “The U.S. Navy had come a long way since that tragic August night when three of the San Francisco’s sister ships were lost.”130 The

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usually critical King agreed, writing that the “fire hazards appear to have been
eliminated.”131 Events would later show that the Battle of Savo Island would be the last
time Japanese gunfire sank an American ship larger than a destroyer in the Solomons
campaign.

The Japanese, however, continued to wreak havoc on U.S. task forces with their
potent torpedoes. In this battle Japanese “Long Lances” sunk or contributed to the
demise of four of the six ships sunk (including the Juneau, which suffered from a torpedo
hit before being sunk by another from a submarine the next morning). To be sure,
Japanese gunfire added to the carnage, dispatching two destroyers and roughing-up most
of the others, especially the San Francisco. But it was torpedoes that were needed to
send the two anti-aircraft light cruisers to the bottom. Still, given the widespread nature
of the damage suffered by Task Group 67.4, it is a tribute to the perspicacity of Nimitz
and King (and their staffs) for realizing that Japanese torpedo fire represented the primary
hazard. Admittedly, the Japanese battleships employed bombardment ammunition in this
action, which various American skippers noted in their reports and cited as a primary
reason for their salvation. It should also be pointed out that Nimitz and King made this
observation in their reports dating from February and March 1943, respectively, months
after two more battles in November had clearly demonstrated the danger of Japanese
torpedo fire. Nevertheless, commenting on this battle, King wrote that

Jap torpedo attacks are the biggest threat. They appear to succeed in
firing well placed torpedo salvos. They hit from the flank and also
from the disengaged side. They undoubtedly use destroyers and
cruisers as well as submarines well placed in the area.132

131 King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 20.
132 Ibid., Chapter 28, 21.
Nimitz made an even more insightful observation when he wrote that “our heaviest losses in surface night action have come from torpedoes, whereas the damage we have inflicted has been primarily by gunfire.”\textsuperscript{133} Considering that not one U.S. destroyer torpedo had yet struck a Japanese warship in Savo Sound, Nimitz’s assessment was more true than he realized. To correct this situation, he said it was necessary to improve the navy’s torpedo attacks and to

\textbf{Develop night tactics so as to take full advantage of our present superiority in radar fire control while at the same time reducing the enemy’s chance of successful torpedo fire.}\textsuperscript{134}

Nimitz did not say exactly how the navy could improve its ability to hit with torpedoes, but he did write (in his report of the November 12-15 battle in February 1943) that U.S. commanders should use their superior radar to commence firing at ranges beyond visual observation, thereby denying the enemy the use of his searchlights and precluding his ability to launch a “close” destroyer torpedo attack.\textsuperscript{135} Although much more needed to be worked out toward the development of an effective nighttime doctrine, Nimitz articulated one of the concepts that would later be put into effect successfully – opening battle beyond visual range to surprise the enemy. Moreover, Nimitz put his finger on the crux of the problem confronting the navy in the Solomons campaign: U.S. naval commanders continued to focus on creating gunfire opportunities while generally ignoring the potential of U.S. torpedo attacks and the extreme danger posed by those of the enemy.

\textsuperscript{133} Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, February 18, 1943, 20.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 22.
Before the month of November was over two more battles would illustrate how accurate this assessment was.

**The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, Part Two (Nov. 14-15)**

Events moved quickly following the nighttime encounter of November 12-13. Callaghan’s interception of the bombardment force prompted Combined Fleet commander Yamamoto to temporarily recall Tanaka’s convoy carrying the 38th Division. By the afternoon of November 13 the eleven transports and twelve destroyers were on their way again, now scheduled to arrive off Guadalcanal around midnight of November 14-15. On the morning of November 13, Admiral Mikawa went to sea with his 8th Fleet to bombard Henderson Field as originally planned. In addition, Yamamoto directed Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo to incorporate six of Abe’s vessels, including the battleship *Kirishima*, into his Advanced Force. The combined unit would proceed to Guadalcanal to pound the American airfield while Tanaka disembarked his soldiers.

As American aircraft pummeled the immobilized *Hiei* throughout the day of November 13, Mikawa approached Guadalcanal with four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and four destroyers. That night the heavy cruisers *Suzuya* and *Maya* lobbed nearly one thousand eight-inch shells at Henderson Field while the rest of Mikawa’s ships stood guard. The barrage destroyed one Dauntless dive bomber and two Grumman Wildcats, while shrapnel peppered another fifteen fighters. As the results indicated, the cruisers had missed Henderson Field entirely. The Japanese spotter planes had misdirected the eight-inch batteries against Fighter One, an auxiliary airfield used

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only by the interceptors. As dawn broke on November 14 the Cactus Air Force pilots climbed into their untouched machines and prepared to seek their revenge.

This morning found six different naval groups in the Solomon Islands area. To the extreme north was the Advanced Force, which had recently separated into two entities. Admiral Kondo, the overall tactical commander, led the main body of one battleship, two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and nine destroyers southward. He left behind Rear Admiral Takeo Kurita’s Carrier Support Group, comprising the converted aircraft carrier Junyo, two battleships, one heavy cruiser and two destroyers. The latter force would steam south only if the U. S. Navy offered a major challenge to the reinforcement and bombardment operation. In the central Solomons Tanaka’s twenty-three-ship Reinforcement Group approached Guadalcanal through the “Slot” while Mikawa’s 8th Fleet proceeded homeward on a reciprocal course, west of the archipelago’s central channel.

Two American fleets cruised south of Guadalcanal. Approximately 200 miles south-southwest of Guadalcanal was Rear Admiral Thomas Kinkaid’s Task Force 16, built around the damaged Enterprise. With intelligence indicating a major Japanese operation about to begin, South Pacific commander Halsey had ordered the carrier to sea from Noumea on November 11. Civilian repairmen sailed with the ship, struggling to fix its jammed forward elevator and other injuries sustained from the clash at Santa Cruz. On November 13, with the elevator still inoperable, Kinkaid flew off fifteen (nine Avengers and six Wildcats) of his seventy-eight planes to Guadalcanal to ease the

137 Frank, Guadalcanal, 464.
congestion on his ship.\textsuperscript{138} The nine torpedo bombers were the aircraft that had chanced upon the stricken \textit{Hiei} and helped contribute to its destruction.

Rear Admiral Willis A. Lee’s Task Force 64 comprised the sixth and final naval group in the Solomons area. Lee sailed northward with the new battleships \textit{Washington} and \textit{South Dakota} and four destroyers. Around dusk on November 13 Halsey had instructed a strike force to detach itself from Kinkaid’s carrier group and proceed to Savo Sound to protect Henderson Field from enemy bombardment. As Lee’s hastily organized unit headed northward, Lee signaled a rudimentary battle plan to his captains. Unfortunately, Halsey’s order detaching Lee came too late for the latter to intercept Mikawa’s cruisers that night.

Although Lee arrived too late to stop Mikawa on the night of November 13-14, Kinkaid was well positioned to strike him the following morning. At 0915 a carrier scout spotted the 8th Fleet racing homeward, about 270 miles from the \textit{Enterprise}.\textsuperscript{139} An earlier phantom sighting of inbound aircraft had prompted the admiral to launch seventeen dive bombers and ten fighters with orders to fly northward and listen for subsequent contact reports. When Mikawa’s cruisers were located, Kinkaid directed the strike group against them and ordered the pilots to land at Henderson Field. Throughout the morning, American air strikes harassed the retreating 8th Fleet, eventually sinking the cruiser \textit{Kinugasa} and damaging two others with near misses.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{138} Thomas C. Kinkaid, Task Force 16 Action Report, December 22, 1942, 25 (Enclosure D), Record Group 38, Box 18, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 4, 27 (Enclosure D).

\textsuperscript{140} Ugaki, \textit{Fading Victory}, 268.
Despite the initial American focus on Mikawa’s retreating fleet, Tanaka’s southbound convoy had not gone unnoticed by American fliers. Another early morning Enterprise scout had spotted the Reinforcement Group at 0949. At 1412 Kinkaid flew off his last eight dive bombers, along with twelve fighters, and ordered them to attack the transports and then land at Henderson Field. After launching, Kinkaid withdrew his carrier group to the south with just eighteen Wildcats aboard his flagship.\footnote{Kinkaid, Task Force 16 Action Report, December 22, 1942, 5, 27 (Enclosure D).}

Like the morning strikes against Mikawa, those directed against Tanaka in the afternoon were a cooperative effort between the carrier-based and land-based pilots. The first attacks sank two transports and damaged another, forcing it to return to Shortland, with two destroyers for escort. For the rest of the day, Henderson Field’s ground crews struggled to rearm and refuel returning aircraft as quickly as possible. After re-servicing, pilots took off again for another go at the transports. Although the various strike groups were hastily organized and often comprised a mix of air groups, the airmen managed to sink four more transports before darkness brought these operations to a close. Because much time had been lost in fending off the day’s air strikes, Tanaka now estimated that he would not reach Guadalcanal until just before dawn on November 15. On a positive note, only 400 men had been killed in the air attacks.\footnote{Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 822.} Despite the sinkings, Yamamoto ordered Tanaka to continue on to Guadalcanal with his four remaining transports and ten destroyers, four of the latter packed with survivors from the sunken vessels.

By now the main body of Kondo’s Advanced Force, which had been steaming toward Guadalcanal east of the “Slot,” was nearing Savo Sound and preparing to

\footnote{Kinkaid, Task Force 16 Action Report, December 22, 1942, 5, 27 (Enclosure D).}
\footnote{Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 822.}
pulverize Henderson Field. Kondo proceeded to divide his fourteen-ship force into three
groups. The Bombardment Group consisted of the heavy cruisers *Atago* (Kondo’s
flagship) and *Takao*, plus the battleship *Kirishima*. Escorting these vessels was the
Screening Group under Admiral Kimura (who had partaken in the mêlée two nights ago).

From his light cruiser *Nagara* he led six destroyers, four of them veterans of the prior
engagement. To prevent any unexpected surprise appearances by the enemy, Kondo also
organized a Sweeping Group, commanded by Rear Admiral Shintaro Hashimoto. As
commander of Destroyer Squadron 3, Hashimoto would sweep ahead of the
Bombardment Group with the light cruiser *Sendai* (flagship) and three destroyers and
flush out any American warships that lurked in Savo Sound.

By late afternoon Kondo expected some sort of naval encounter to take place that
night. Several Japanese scouts reported an American task force containing two “cruisers”
and four destroyers just south of Guadalcanal, heading north. More messages of similar
sightings reached Kondo’s flagship, including one reporting the presence of enemy
battleships. Kondo, however, doubted that the Americans had brought capital ships to
Guadalcanal. With the arrival of darkness and the receipt of yet another transmission of
two enemy “cruisers” and four destroyers, now sixteen miles west-southwest of Cape
Esperance, the admiral notified his commanders to expect “a few” American cruisers and
destroyers to oppose their mission.143

Admiral Lee also expected to meet his enemy this night. He had learned of
Tanaka’s convoy from the reports by American pilots at Guadalcanal. In addition, the
American submarine *Flying Fish*, which had spied Kondo’s fleet earlier that day, radioed

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143 Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 468-469, 479.
that it had seen a powerful surface force headed for Savo Sound.\textsuperscript{144} Although the message lacked an exact accounting of the Japanese ships present, Halsey realized that this group was a bombardment force. Consequently, he ordered Lee to prevent the anticipated attack on Henderson Field and the disembarkation of troops from the transport convoy.

After sunset Lee’s ships approached Savo Island from the west in column. The destroyer \textit{Walke} led the formation, followed (at 300 yard intervals) by the destroyers \textit{Benham}, \textit{Preston} and \textit{Gwin}. Five thousand yards to the rear were the battleships \textit{Washington} (Lee’s flagship) and \textit{South Dakota}. Although given the name Task Force 64, Lee’s squadron was anything but a cohesive unit. Not only had his battleships never operated together before departing Noumea on November 11, but his escorts had been plucked from four different destroyer divisions.\textsuperscript{145} The quartet had been assigned to Task Force 64 because they possessed the most fuel at the time of their detachment from Kinkaid’s carrier group.\textsuperscript{146} Moreover, none of these destroyers possessed an SG radar and only one (lead ship \textit{Walke}) possessed a fire control radar. On the other hand, both battleships possessed SG and fire control radars, making Lee the first commander in the campaign to go into battle with the modern machine.

Like Scott before him, Lee steered his fleet north of Savo Island, across his opponent’s anticipated line of advance. But rather than wait there for his adversary to arrive, Lee turned his formation south at 2149 and headed into Savo Sound, east of the

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 469.

\textsuperscript{145} Willis A. Lee, Task Force 64 Action Report, February 18, 1943, 7-8, Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{146} Morison, \textit{Struggle for Guadalcanal}, 271-272.
conical island. Shortly thereafter the occasional superiority of Japanese eyes over American radar demonstrated itself when lookouts from Hashimoto’s Sweeping Unit spotted Lee’s vessels heading south. The SG radar screens on the American battleships, which were relatively blind astern due to interference from the mast, remained blank.\textsuperscript{147} Conscious of his reconnaissance mission, Hashimoto radioed Kondo that he had sighted two “cruisers” and four destroyers heading into Savo Sound.\textsuperscript{148} Hashimoto then detached the destroyer \textit{Ayanami} and ordered it to sweep around Savo’s western side while the rest of his force continued to shadow the Americans down the eastern side.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{148} Frank, \textit{Guadalcanal}, 474.
The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal
November 14-15, 1942

Map 5. The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (Part Two)
Now southeast of Savo Island, Lee ordered his formation to turn due west at 2252, with the apparent aim of exiting the sound between Cape Esperance and Savo Island. Just after the starboard turn the Japanese pursuers emerged from the radars’ rearward blind spot and began registering on the battleships’ scopes. With visibility unusually good on this night due to scant cloud cover and a quarter moon shining, the Washington’s main battery director sighted the Japanese trio off the starboard beam eleven minutes later.\textsuperscript{149} Soon both capital ships began firing sixteen-inch shells against Hashimoto’s vessels 18,500 yards away. The American destroyers, with shorter lookout stations and no SG radar, could not see the distant opponent either electronically or visually.\textsuperscript{150}

Though still convinced the falling shells originated from cruiser muzzles, Hashimoto realized he was outgunned.\textsuperscript{151} He wheeled his vessels about and laid a thick smokescreen, which did little to impede the battleships’ radar controlled rifles. Nevertheless, despite many salvos and reports from the Washington’s and South Dakota’s radar operators of disappearing “pips” and “fuzzy flickering” of previously strong echoes, the three Japanese ships escaped unharmed.\textsuperscript{152}

Phase two began almost as soon as the first ended. Apprised of the American presence by Hashimoto, Kondo ordered Kimura to take his light cruiser Nagara and four of his destroyers (those which he had fought with two nights ago) down the western side of Savo Island to help dispatch the enemy vessels. Kondo decided to remain north of the

\textsuperscript{149} Glenn B. Davis, USS Washington Action Report, November 27, 1942, 7, Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{150} Lee, Task Force 64 Action Report, 7.

\textsuperscript{151} Frank, Guadalcanal, 475.

\textsuperscript{152} Davis, Washington Action Report, 8; Thomas L. Gatch, USS South Dakota Action Report, undated, 5, Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
sound with his Bombardment Group and two of Kimura’s destroyers until the way was clear for him to commence his attack on Henderson Field.

Sweeping around Savo Island in a counter-clockwise direction were the *Ayanami*, followed at a distance by Kimura’s five ships. On a reciprocal northwestern course were the American destroyers led by the senior skipper, Commander Thomas Fraser in the *Walke*. Lookouts on this ship detected the *Ayanami* in the direction of Savo Island at 2330. The *Walke*, the only American destroyer equipped with a gunnery radar set, opened fire, which the *Ayanami* reciprocated. The *Benham*’s gunners, who could not see the *Walke*’s quarry, fired next, aiming at the dim gun flashes in the distance. The vigilant lookouts on the *Preston*, the third ship in line, spotted Kimura’s vessels approaching behind the *Ayanami*. The destroyer fired on them, just as the quintet entered the island’s shadow. This larger target attracted the fire of the other three American destroyers as well.

On the *Washington*, the main battery director could not distinguish the radar signal of Kimura’s ships from the land echoes behind them. The secondary battery gunners, unable to discern these vessels either, fired instead on the *Ayanami*, which drew within two miles of the battleship. The *Washington*’s five-inch starboard gunners brought the destroyer to a halt and it began to sink.

About this time, the *South Dakota* experienced the first of its two electrical power failures, caused by operators inadvertently overloading a few crucial circuits. The shut

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153 W. J. Collum, jr., USS *Walke* Action Report, November 30, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD.


down of lights, radars, gyros and other power-driven devices, including the turrets, temporarily emasculated the ship’s offensive capabilities. Although crewmen restored the power three minutes later, various instruments were slow to re-establish functionality, limiting the effectiveness of the ship’s gunfire.¹⁵⁶

Despite the slow recovery of various fire control aids, the South Dakota resumed shooting. While its secondary batteries targeted Kimura’s group, the aft turret fired at Hashimoto’s vessels, which had turned around and come south again. Firing over the stern, the sixteen-inch battery set the ship’s own float planes afire. The illumination was short-lived since a subsequent salvo blew the aircraft overboard and extinguished the fires.¹⁵⁷ Despite the voluminous firing, all the South Dakota’s shells failed to find targets.

Similarly, Fraser’s destroyers failed to strike any of Kimura’s ships. Peering into the darkness of Savo Island, they struggled to pinpoint the location of their enemy and to control their gunfire. As the Benham’s gunnery officer wrote, “The fall of shot could not be observed and the tracer from our guns was very poor.”¹⁵⁸

Lee’s destroyers gave the Japanese little to worry about below the waterline either. Recognizing their opponent as a destroyer force, all four American skippers withheld their torpedoes in anticipation of more “worthwhile” prey to come.¹⁵⁹ While

¹⁵⁶ Gatch, South Dakota Action Report, 5-6.
¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 6.
¹⁵⁸ R. G. Mayer, USS Benham Action Report, November 29, 1942, 1 (Enclosure B), Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
¹⁵⁹ Collum, Walke Action Report, 2 (Enclosure J); John B. Taylor, Benham Action Report, 2; W. W. Woods, USS Preston Action Report, November 30, 3, Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD; John B. Fellows, USS Gwin Action Report, November 16, 2, Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
such targets would soon appear, none of the American destroyers would be around to tackle them.

With no reservations about using torpedoes against their enemy, Kimura’s vessels sent a multitude of “fish” swimming toward the American destroyer line. Once these were away, they brought their guns into action, quickly demonstrating a proficiency in marksmanship quite different from the Americans’ poor exhibition thus far.

Admittedly, the Japanese enjoyed an advantageous tactical position. Operating in the shadow of Savo Island and firing nearly flashless powder, in sharp contrast to the “blinding flame” spewed forth by American muzzles, Kimura’s vessels were nearly invisible to many American eyes.\(^\text{160}\) So well camouflaged were they that some American officers thought they were being fired upon by shore batteries on Savo Island.\(^\text{161}\) The Walke’s skipper later reported that the torpedo that struck his ship originated from a submarine near Savo, since no vessel could be seen in the direction from which the missile had come.\(^\text{162}\)

The American destroyers may have been fired on from shore batteries, but not from Savo Island. Officers on the Walke, Benham and Gwin all reported seeing or receiving fire from an enemy cruiser to port, their unengaged side, in the direction of Guadalcanal.\(^\text{163}\) Since there were no Japanese warships between the American destroyers and Guadalcanal, the observers either misidentified a friendly vessel or confused land

\(^{160}\) Lee, Task Force 64 Action Report, 9.

\(^{161}\) Davis, Washington Action Report, 8.

\(^{162}\) Collum, Walke Action Report, 2.

\(^{163}\) Collum, Walke Action Report, 2; Taylor, Benham Action Report, 4; Fellows, Gwin Action Report, 2.
batteries or signal lights for a hostile naval presence. Whatever the lookouts saw, these 
phantom warship sightings distracted American attention and prompted the *Walke* to 
divide its fire.164

Kimura’s vessels had no such concerns. With superior optics and non-blinding 
powder, the Japanese gunners struck the *Walke, Preston* and *Gwin* with repeated salvos. 
“Long Lances” then smacked into the two leading American destroyers, sinking the 
*Walke* and blowing the bow off the *Benham*, forcing it out of the battle.165 Japanese 
gunfire pounded the *Preston* to the bottom of Savo Sound and hammered the *Gwin*, 
compelling it to retire.166 Kimura’s destroyer squadron thus removed Lee’s destroyers 
from the battle as the final phase was about to begin.

Despite the failure of the four American destroyers to strike their opponents, they 
had succeeded in drawing fire away from the capital ships. But this good fortune was 
about to change for the *South Dakota*. Forced to maneuver around the crippled 
destroyers, Captain Glenn B. Davis conned the *Washington* to port while Captain Thomas 
L. Gatch swung the *South Dakota* to starboard. The burning destroyers silhouetted the 
latter as it passed, revealing the ship to Kimura’s eastward-heading squadron. Kimura 
radioed his discovery to Kondo and ordered a torpedo attack. After thirty-four “Long 
Lances” leapt from southwesterly-pointing tubes, Kimura’s vessels reversed course to 
port, in pursuit of the American capital ship.167 Luckily for the *South Dakota*, not only


did every torpedo miss the target, but Kimura temporarily lost contact with his foe after the turn.\textsuperscript{168}

While this was going on, Kondo had been biding his time to the northwest, waiting for Kimura and Hashimoto to dispose of the American squadron so he could commence his bombardment run unmolested. Hearing Kimura’s broadcast that an American battleship was in Savo Sound, Kondo swung his group to the southeast. As he did, the \textit{Washington} and \textit{South Dakota} began to emerge from the sound on a northwesterly heading.

As the opposing ships closed on one another, the \textit{South Dakota} experienced a second power failure. For five minutes its instruments and turrets remained inoperable.\textsuperscript{169} Technicians restored the electricity just before Kondo’s lookouts spotted the battle wagon. Gatch and his staff on the bridge were given little opportunity to make sense of the many “pips” that suddenly appeared on their radar screen when they found themselves illuminated by the enemy.

At short range and a propitious angle, Kondo’s two cruisers and two destroyers fired a spread of torpedoes at the \textit{South Dakota}. Japanese projectiles then began to fall around the American battleship, many of them slamming into the ship’s upper works.\textsuperscript{170} But once again, the torpedoes failed to find the \textit{South Dakota}.

With the \textit{South Dakota}’s power so recently restored, its gun crews had no time to calculate firing solutions against their newly discovered assailants. After a few salvos from the main batteries directed at the Japanese searchlights, hits against the \textit{South Dakota}.

\textsuperscript{168} Morison, \textit{Struggle for Guadalcanal}, 278.

\textsuperscript{169} Frank, \textit{Guadalcanal}, 479.

Dakota’s tower disabled its radars, range finders and other aids that fed target data to the sixteen-inch guns.\textsuperscript{171} The South Dakota’s main batteries fell silent, leaving the five-inch gunners to carry on the fight. They fired with zeal, but their marksmanship was poor.

Although the South Dakota failed to inflict much damage on its opponents, it succeeded in attracting the full attention of Kondo’s gunners, much as Fraser’s destroyers had done earlier. This left the Washington undisturbed as its crew methodically prepared to retaliate. Off the South Dakota’s port bow, the American flagship had been tracking the Bombardment Group with its SG radar ever since Kondo’s vessels emerged from behind Savo Island.\textsuperscript{172} The Washington’s sophisticated scope revealed an extra large “pip” in the Japanese formation, suspected to be the battleship reported earlier by the Flying Fish. When the fire control radars latched on to this target, the flagship’s guns finally spoke up. At a range of 8,400 yards, the main batteries and a pair of secondary mounts lashed out at the unsuspecting Kirishima, while another pair of five-inch mounts aimed at the Atago. Of the seventy-five sixteen-inch shells fired at the Kirishima, nine struck the target, along with about forty five-inch projectiles.\textsuperscript{173} The Atago, however, eluded all but some superficial damage.

When Kondo ordered his column to reverse course in order to launch another torpedo strike against the two northwesterly-heading American battleships, the helm of the Kirishima failed to respond. The Washington’s shells had damaged the ship’s engine

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{172} Davis, Washington Action Report, 9.

\textsuperscript{173} Davis, Washington Action Report, 21; USSBS, 1:142.
rooms and flooded the steering gear rooms, restricting its movements to slow circling. Fortunately for the *Kirishima*’s crew, the battle moved away to the northwest.

The remainder of Kondo’s ships wheeled about and fired more torpedoes against the two American battle wagons, all of which missed. Before long, Captain Gatch decided to withdraw from the running fight. With most of his ship’s communications, radars, directors and fire control circuits knocked out by Japanese shells, the *South Dakota* lacked the means to smite its opponent, yet risked its own destruction by continuing to cruise through a sea of “Long Lances.”

As the *South Dakota* broke off to the south, Lee continued to the northwest, dragging nearly every Japanese vessel with him. The Japanese fired more torpedoes at the *Washington*, hoping to incapacitate their lone adversary before it reached the Reinforcement Group approaching from the north.

Apprised of the situation, Tanaka ordered two of his destroyers to move ahead and attack the enemy battleship with torpedoes. As the pair spurted forward they laid a smoke screen to help conceal the troop-laden convoy behind them.

This proved too much for Lee. Although he had hoped to bring his guns to bear against the transports, he feared a close-range torpedo attack if he ventured into the smoky seas ahead. Recognizing that he had drawn Kondo’s ships far enough away from his injured comrades to allow them to escape and that the troop convoy would not have enough time to disembark its troops and supplies before dawn, Lee decided to retire at 0033. His pursuers continued the chase for quite some time, launching swarms of

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174 *USSBS*, 1:142.

175 Lee, Task Force 64 Action Report, 4.
torpedoes up the Washington’s southward-heading wake. According to Lee, “Four or five torpedoes came uncomfortably close and were avoided only by bold and skillful handling on the bridge, and calm and judicious coaching from Battle Two.”

Eventually, the fast battleship succeeded in outdistancing its hunters, making good its escape and its eventual rendezvous with South Dakota. The Gwin and Benham also regrouped and headed back to base in tandem. However, the damage caused by the torpedo hit on Benham was worsening as the sea grew rougher. With the ship beginning to break apart, the skipper ordered it abandoned. After the Gwin had collected the crew of the Benham, it attempted to sink it with a torpedo. The first exploded prematurely, one ran erratic and two others missed, forcing the Gwin to sink it with gunfire.

After giving up the chase against Lee’s flagship, Kondo reassembled his units and hurriedly withdrew to the north, hoping to get clear of the area before the Cactus Air Force could catch him. Although the way was clear for the Japanese transports, Lee had correctly deduced that Tanaka would not have time to disgorge all his troops and supplies before daybreak. To prevent his four transports from being sunk off Guadalcanal by the soon-to-rise American airmen, Tanaka requested and received permission to run them aground.

The need for Tanaka to withdraw his destroyers before dawn precluded the unloading of the many troops aboard them. What remained provided the Japanese on Guadalcanal with little reason to celebrate. Only 2,000 men, 360 cases of ammunition and 1,500 bales of rice (about a four-day supply) were put ashore before American aircraft, artillery and the destroyer Meade, which had been anchored in Tulagi overnight,

\[^{176}\text{Ibid., 5.}\]
destroyed the grounded vessels.\textsuperscript{177} Aircraft subsequently blew up much of the unloaded ammunition on the beaches.\textsuperscript{178}

**Assessment of the Battle**

“Audacious planning and execution” was how Halsey described Lee’s conduct of the engagement that concluded the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal.\textsuperscript{179} Nimitz, King and Pye were likewise praiseworthy of the navy’s first battleship action since the Spanish-American War. Based on the available information, the three admirals reckoned that Lee had encountered a superior force of two battleships, three-to-five cruisers and about a dozen destroyers. After revising the exaggerated claims of the participants downward, Nimitz credited Task Force 64 with the destruction of one battleship, two cruisers, two destroyers and the damaging of another battleship, two cruisers and three destroyers.\textsuperscript{180} The truth, of course, was less impressive. Lee’s flagship had sunk the battleship *Kirishima* and the destroyer *Ayanami*, but the rest of the task force had failed to inflict any noteworthy damage. In exchange, the Japanese had sunk three of Lee’s destroyers and damaged the *Gwin* and *South Dakota*, leaving only the *Washington* unharmed. Despite the fact that twelve of Kondo’s fourteen vessels remained undamaged, Lee could justifiably claim a victory given his prevention of the bombardment and destruction of a capital ship, albeit one far inferior to Lee’s newer pair. (The *Kirishima*, though modernized with enhanced speed and armor, was a World War I-era battleship and

\textsuperscript{177} Ugaki, *Fading Victory*, 276.

\textsuperscript{178} Dull, *Battle History*, 247.

\textsuperscript{179} William Halsey, Report of Night Action, Task Force 64, March 2, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{180} Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, February 18, 1943, 2-3.
compared unfavorably in almost every respect to the recently commissioned *Washington* and *South Dakota*. The American battleships boasted approximately 50-60 percent thicker armor along the waterline, over the turrets and around the superstructure than the *Kirishima*, and had an even greater superiority in deck protection.\(^{181}\) Although the caliber of the *Kirishima*’s main batteries was only two inches smaller than Lee’s guns, the overall weight of shell was significantly less. A full broadside by the *Kirishima* discharged 11,920 pounds of steel and explosives, less than half the 24,300 pounds worth of destruction each American battleship could hurl back.\(^{182}\)

Perhaps the most notable feature of this battle (from the American perspective) was the relatively small amount of criticism that followed it. Unlike King’s previous battle analyses, where the narrative of the engagement was peppered with the Commander in Chief’s interjections censuring mistakes or pointing out missed opportunities, his report on this battle contained no such comments except of a brief summary of lessons learned at the end. Nimitz was also uncharacteristically reticent. He, in fact, charged Lee with only one mistake – his failure to fly off (or jettison) the scout planes perched on the battleships, which could have served as a beacon for Kimura’s destroyermen had the flaming aircraft not been blown overboard. This was a lesson taught at the Battle of Savo Island and learned by Scott and his officers at the Battle of Cape Esperance.

In this battle various American officers, including Lee and Captain Davis of the *Washington*, noted that the Japanese guns barely produced any flash upon firing, in


\(^{182}\) Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 472.
comparison to the U.S. Navy’s propellant, which generated a blinding light. They blamed this circumstance for the difficulties encountered in the gunnery duels with the Japanese destroyers in phase two. In his report to King, Nimitz wrote that this was the first battle in which U.S. naval forces encountered an enemy employing flashless powder.

But if this development were news to Nimitz, it should not have been. At the battle of Savo Island several captains had reported being unable to see their enemy during the encounter, with the skipper of the destroyer Wilson writing that “The enemy’s gun flashes did not appear to be of as great intensity as the gun flashes of our ships…”183 Thus, the navy should have been prepared to fight an enemy that would not reveal itself by its gun flashes.

Given this circumstance, it is unforgivable that Lee put his force in a position where the enemy could hide himself in the “loom of Savo Island.” Had Lee confronted the Japanese outside of Savo Sound (as Scott had done at the Battle of Cape Esperance), Kimura’s destroyers would not have been able to conceal their silhouettes against the backdrop of Savo Island and the American radars would have performed better. Nimitz noted that the Japanese took advantage of Savo Island’s cloaking effect, but he did not criticize Lee’s decision to fight inside the sound. Lee admitted that his new battleships were not designed to fight light forces in the close confines of Savo Sound where their long-range hitting power was nullified and where they were more vulnerable to enemy torpedoes. Yet, Lee nevertheless chose to take his battleships into the sound rather than wait for his quarry north of it. He later explained that he had done this in order to fight the enemy bombardment force first, followed by the covering force that would

183 Walter H. Price, USS Wilson Action Report, August 20, 1942, 4, Record Group 38, Box 1516, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
presumably be waiting outside the sound. As it turned out, Lee had been fortunate that his destroyers had drawn the attention of Kimura’s torpedomen. The “Long Lances” that smacked into the Walke and Benham (and barely missed the Gwin) could well have struck the U.S. Navy’s new capital ships.

Although it had not been Lee’s intention to use his destroyers as bait to draw fire away from his battleships, the fact that they did perform this beneficial service was due to Lee’s wise deployment. He departed from past practice by placing his four escorts 5,000 yards ahead of his battle line, far enough forward for them to serve as a legitimate scouts. Pye praised Lee for untethering the destroyers (to some extent) from the battle line. But while they were granted a degree of freedom, they were hardly used offensively or effectively, as the War College President and King (in his summary) pointed out. Although neither said so, much of this failure was due to the absence of a divisional commander to direct the destroyers. Commenting on the lack of leadership among the northern group of cruisers at the Battle of Savo Island, Pye wrote in December 1942 (i.e., after this battle had already taken place) that an officer without the responsibilities of running a ship should be appointed to command any force sent into combat. Such a commander was sorely missed on the night of November 14-15. Although Fraser had (by virtue of his seniority) been placed in charge of the four destroyers, he, like Captain Riefkohl before him at the Battle of Savo Island, behaved more like a warship skipper than a divisional commander. Concerned only with fighting his own ship, Fraser

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185 William Pye, Comments on Actions Reports covering activities in the Solomons Islands, August 7, 8, and 9, 1942, December 8, 1942, 14, Record Group 38, Box 38, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
neglected his obligation to coordinate the destroyers’ actions, which resulted in each ship fighting independently and without success.

Fraser’s biggest omission was his failure to order a concentrated torpedo attack against Kimura’s force. Worse still, neither he nor the other three skippers even ordered independent torpedo firings. Despite the propitious firing angle and the fact that the presence of Savo Island prevented Kimura’s vessels from turning away, no American torpedoes were sent against them. After the battle none of the skippers (or senior surviving officers) expressed regret over this fact. As the commander of the Benham explained, “I assumed we were firing at a destroyer and therefore did not fire my torpedoes.”186 As this statement indicated, U.S. Navy doctrine was to blame for this missed opportunity. It held that destroyers were to save their torpedoes for use against capital ships. If none were present, enemy cruisers could be targeted instead. Only in rare circumstances (such as if the battle line were threatened by enemy light forces that had penetrated the screen) would a squadron commander be justified in ordering torpedoes employed against destroyers.187 Apparently none of the U.S. destroyer captains felt that his opponent qualified as an exceptional case that warranted an expenditure of torpedoes.

Lee viewed the situation similarly. Rather than expressing regret that three destroyers sank with a full complement of torpedoes still aboard, he instead praised his destroyers’ gunfire for forcing the enemy to fire his torpedoes “prematurely” against them. Viewing destroyers as unworthy of torpedo fire, Captain Thomas Gatch of the

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186 John Taylor, USS Benham Action Report, November 29, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 25, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

187 War Instructions, United States Navy, 1934, 43.
South Dakota speculated that the Japanese probably mistook Fraser’s destroyers for cruisers. Lee concluded (in an apparent criticism of what he considered to be rigidly dogmatic behavior) that this beneficial outcome occurred because Japanese doctrine seems to require that their destroyers fire torpedoes before employing gunfire. Lee failed to realize, even in hindsight, that his destroyers should have acted similarly. Halsey, a former destroyerman, responded that “Under normal conditions firing torpedoes before opening fire with guns should be doctrine for any destroyer in a night action.” Although this was U.S. Navy policy for destroyers stalking enemy battleships, it was not the case against destroyers. U.S. Navy War Instructions stipulated that when U.S. destroyers confronted enemy destroyers, they were to employ gunfire, not torpedoes. By adhering to this precept, Fraser’s destroyers missed a chance to inflict serious harm against their opponent.

For Lee, the underutilization of his destroyers was unimportant. The battle was won with the navy’s big guns and the fact that torpedoes had not been fired did not really matter. Lee, of course, was not alone in the faith he placed in American gunfire. Captain Gatch claimed that every vessel brought under the South Dakota’s fire had been hit. (In actuality, the battleship failed to strike anything except perhaps for a hit against the destroyer Ayanami.) Captain Glenn Davis of the Washington boasted setting four

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188 King, Battle Experience: Comment by Captain Gatch, March 25, 1943, Chapter 30, 42.
189 Lee, Task Force 64 Action Report, February 18, 1943, 2, 8.
191 War Instructions, United States Navy, 1934, 43.
192 Gatch, South Dakota Action Report, undated, 11.
193 O’Hara, U.S. Navy Against the Axis, 126.
ships afire and damaging others. Due to this apparent success Davis proclaimed the navy’s radar-controlled gunfire to be accurate at long ranges at night.\textsuperscript{194} Halsey, Nimitz and King all concurred.\textsuperscript{195} Estimating that the United States was about a year ahead of Japan in the development of radar, Nimitz wrote that “great advantages can accrue to our side” if the navy fully exploits this technological advantage.\textsuperscript{196} Lee added an uncharacteristically sober analysis when he wrote that

\begin{quote}
We entered this action confident that we could out shoot the enemy...We, however, realized then, and it should not be forgotten now, that our margin of superiority was due almost entirely to our possession of radar. Certainly we have no edge on the Japs in experience, skill, training or permanence of personnel.\textsuperscript{197}
\end{quote}

Although the navy’s fire control radars had the potential to make nighttime gunfire as accurate as daytime gunfire, the truth was that the device was not as effective as American naval officers believed. For example, in the first phase of this battle, Lee’s battleships failed to hit any of Hashimoto’s three vessels, despite hurling over a hundred radar-directed sixteen-inch shells against them. Yet the captains of the two battleships reported with certainty that each had hit and probably sunk one of the ships and possibly the third one as well. During this action the Washington’s SG radar officer reported shells landing on the target, followed by the “fuzzy flickering” of the previously strong “pip.”\textsuperscript{198} In his account of this action the South Dakota’s Captain Gatch wrote that his

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{195} Halsey, Report of Night Action, Task Force 64, March 2, 1943, 2; Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, February 18, 1943, 22; King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 30, 41.
\textsuperscript{196} Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, February 18, 1943, 23.
\textsuperscript{197} Lee, Task Force 64 Action Report, February 18, 1943, 8.
\textsuperscript{198} Davis, \textit{Washington} Action Report, November 27, 1942, 7-8.
\end{footnotes}
main batteries fired until its quarry had disappeared from the radar screen and the remaining ship rendered “an indistinct and doubtful radar ‘pip.’”

What virtually no one in the U.S. Navy realized was that a target’s disappearance from the radar screen did not necessarily mean that it had sunk. In this battle and subsequent actions radar operators confidently pronounced disappearing echoes as sinking vessels. But in many cases these “sunken” ships were not only still afloat, but often unharmed. Vanishing “pips” were frequently the result of ships moving beyond effective radar range or into some atmospheric interference, which was very common in the rain cloud-laden (and island-studded) Solomon Seas. With the narrow-beamed fire control radars, it was also not unusual for the radar operator to mistakenly latch on to the plumes of seawater erupting around the target. When the gunfire stopped and the geysers disappeared, the radar scope would be empty, leading to the erroneously conclusion that the enemy had been sunk. Not until after the war (when exact information on enemy losses became available) did the navy realize the limitations of its gunnery radars.

As a result of its mistaken assumptions, the navy became overly confident in the effectiveness of its radar-directed gunfire. It failed to understand that its two primary successes to date – the sinking of the cruiser Furutaka at the Battle of Cape Esperance and the disabling of the battleship Kirishima in this action – had not been accomplished with gunfire directed by radar alone. In both cases gunfire was able to be spotted and corrected optically. The exceedingly close range made this possible at Cape Esperance, while the unusually clear conditions and the large target size and shell bursts made this

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199 Gatch, South Dakota Action Report, undated, 2.

200 Crenshaw, South Pacific Destroyer, 237.
possible on the night of November 14-15. But the navy viewed these successes (as well as other spurious ones) as evidence that it could consistently strike distant targets at night with its radar-controlled guns. The truth was that it was difficult to hit warships using radar data alone. Radar-trained guns could generate hits, but more often they simply placed shells near the target. Hits therefore usually required a very high volume of fire (i.e., many ships firing at the same target) or visual sighting of the target to adjust the fall of shots. (This was especially true for deflection. Radar ranges tended to be relatively accurate, but the need to keep a target centered between two offsetting pulses proved difficult, especially when multiple ships led some operators simply to split the difference and point the guns between them.201) Under certain conditions it was possible to see the shell splashes on the cathode ray scopes. But for the most part, attempting to spot the projectiles with radar was ineffective. Unaware of these facts, the navy came away from this battle with an unjustified confidence in radar’s ability direct its gunfire, thereby reinforcing the navy’s embrace of the naval rifle as the primary weapon. Few seemed to realize the potential of radar-directed torpedo fire. Unlike gunfire, torpedoes were unaffected by slight miscalculations in range, while spreads of “fish” would compensate for small errors in deflection.

Given the navy’s reliance on radar, it is not surprising that officers would complain about the lack of adequate access to its information. Since an admiral or captain could not be in the radar room and on the bridge at the same time, he inevitably had to rely on subordinates to relay information to him. In his post-battle report, Lee bemoaned his dependence on others to periodically describe the radar picture to him,

which was never done to his complete satisfaction. He wrote that he, the captain and the
gunnery officers each needed their own radar scope to adequately perform their duties.\textsuperscript{202} The \textit{Washington}’s Captain Davis agreed that the navy was failing to fully utilize the
information that radar provided. He complained of the difficulty of getting contact
information quickly transmitted to those in need of it, a problem brought about, in part,
because the information had to pass through relay “talkers.” The commotion of battle
often led to the unintentional repetition of many radar reports as they made their way
through the communication chain. To help remedy this problem he recommended that a
competent officer be assigned the sole duty of filtering the abundant radar information to
provide the captain with a concise overview of the radar situation.\textsuperscript{203} Unknown to Lee or
Davis, the staff at Nimitz’s headquarters would soon address these concerns in a
forthcoming bulletin that established procedures for what would be called a Combat
Information Center. (This will be discussed in the next chapter.)

Unlike Lee and Davis, the \textit{South Dakota}’s Captain Gatch had few insights on
how combat efficiency might be improved. He did, however, comment on the
improvements made in damage control. Like the \textit{San Francisco} from two nights earlier,
the \textit{South Dakota} had been plastered with shells on its topsides. Yet, despite this
punishment, Gatch wrote that no serious fires erupted. Those that did were quickly
extinguished near their point of ignition. This good fortune, stated Gatch, was due to the
prior removal of paint and linoleum from aboard ship, the use of flame retardant canvas

\textsuperscript{202} Lee, Task Force 64 Action Report, February 18, 1943, 9.

and bedding bags and the efficiency of repair parties. Once again, the navy showed that at least one of the lessons from the Battle of Savo Island had been taken to heart.

Generally satisfied with the conduct of the engagement on the night of November 14-15, Nimitz, as mentioned, was uncharacteristically brief in his report on the battle. However, he did comment on one matter which, unknown to him at the time, was the navy’s biggest problem in nighttime warfare – faulty torpedoes. He noted that the Gwin had been unable to dispatch the foundering Benham with torpedoes due to a premature explosion, an erratic run and two misses. Apportioning the blame between personnel and ordnance failures, he wrote simply that more training of crews is necessary and that “continued effort will be required to improve material.” The brevity and lack of resolution in Nimitz’s response to this situation illustrates his obliviousness to a serious problem. Here was clear evidence that the navy’s torpedoes were defective, yet the Pacific Fleet’s Commander in Chief responded in a most lackadaisical manner. To be fair, this incident came just two days after the first Battle of Guadalcanal, where Callaghan’s destroyer skippers claimed (erroneously) fourteen or fifteen torpedo hits against the enemy and squadron leader Tobin reported gunnery and torpedo batteries to be “most effective.” But Nimitz should have recognized that a certified quadruple torpedo failure against a friendly, stationary ship in daytime was more indicative of ordnance performance than claims made in a confused nighttime mêlée. More importantly, this was not the first time torpedoes had malfunctioned while attempting to

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204 Gatch, South Dakota Action Report, undated, 14.

205 Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, March 18, 1943, 2, Record Group 38, Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

206 Robert Tobin, Destroyer Squadron 12 Action Report, November 27, 1942, 5, Record Group 38, Box 23, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
sink a wounded comrade. On the afternoon of August 8, 1942, just prior to the Battle of Savo Island, the destroyer *Hull* had attempted to dispatch the burning transport vessel *George F. Elliot*. After four torpedoes were fired without effect, the effort was abandoned. On the following day, the destroyer *Selfridge* was detailed to finish off the wrecked cruiser *Canberra*, which had been battered the night before by Mikawa’s cruiser squadron. Of the four torpedoes fired against the Australian cripple, three ran deep and only one hit, forcing another destroyer to complete the job. At the Battle of Santa Cruz in late October Admiral Kinkaid ordered destroyer *Shaw* to sink the mortally wounded *Porter*. After two of *Shaw’s* torpedoes passed harmlessly underneath the ship, the *Shaw* resorted to gunfire to finish the task. Later that afternoon the destroyer *Mustin* fired eight torpedoes at the abandoned aircraft carrier *Hornet* to speed its demise. Two ran erratically, one prematurely exploded and five hit, only three of which exploded. When the destroyer *Anderson* fired another eight torpedoes at the carrier, two more failed to work properly.

As these episodes illustrate, American torpedoes were mechanically unreliable. Except for some old models being phased out, the U.S. Navy entered World War II with three basic torpedoes. The smallest was the Mark 13, carried by aircraft. The Mark 14 and 15, carried by submarines and destroyers, respectively, were nearly identical, except that the latter (which required greater range) was slightly longer and heavier. Although slow, the Mark 13 was a relatively dependable weapon. But this was not the case with the other two, which suffered from three major problems. First, the weapon’s magnetic influence exploder rarely functioned properly. Introduced under great secrecy in the 1920s, the device was designed to set off the warhead as the torpedo entered a ship’s
magnetic field under the hull. By detonating beneath a ship’s unarmored bottom, the torpedo inflicted far more damage than if it exploded against a ship’s steel-plated side. Although potentially a devastating weapon, the exploder’s vast complexity combined with the variations in the earth’s magnetic field at different latitudes (especially between the northern waters off New England, where the exploder was tested, and the equatorial seas of the South Pacific) made the missile an extremely fickle performer. Second, errors in calibration and faulty depth sensors resulted in the Mark 14s and 15s running about ten feet deeper than set. Lastly, the torpedo’s contact exploder mechanism contained a critical defect. When striking a hull at a perpendicular angle at high speed, the warhead’s flimsy pins guiding the firing block often bent, preventing detonation.

Few destroyermen suspected that their torpedoes were faulty. In the confusion of battle most believed their weapons were generating hits. Their only criticism was that the Mark 15 seemed to lack a sufficiently powerful punch. The Atlanta’s senior surviving officer complained that U.S. torpedoes, which contained only 485 pounds of TNT burster, consistently failed to inflict lethal damage, even against enemy cruisers. Estimating that the enemy’s torpedoes contained about 900 pounds of explosive (in fact it was over 1,000 pounds), he urged that priority be given to the task of upgrading the American warhead with a heavier charge.207

On the other hand, given the nature of submarine warfare, skippers in the “silent service” were keenly aware that their weapons frequently failed to work properly. Their many complaints to the Bureau of Ordnance were met with arrogant denials that the Mark 14 contained any imperfections. The submariners, therefore, took it upon themselves to

207 Campbell D. Emory, USS Atlanta Action Report, November 18, 1942, Enclosure D, 4, Record Group 38, Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
figure out what was wrong with the weapon. Deep-running was the first issue to be addressed. Convinced that their misses early in the war were due to their torpedoes passing too far under the enemy’s hull, skippers returning from patrol convinced Rear Admiral Charles Lockwood, the commander of the Southwest Pacific’s submarine force, to test their hypothesis. In June 1942 Lockwood supervised the firing of torpedoes into a net in an Australian harbor. The results revealed what his captains suspected – that the Mark 14 torpedo ran deep, about eleven feet on average. When Lockwood informed the Bureau of Ordnance of this, an agency spokesman dismissed the results, claiming the submariners’ tests had been performed improperly, rendering the results invalid. Lockwood repeated his tests according to the agency’s strict guidelines and again recorded similar results. This time he radioed his findings to the bureau and sent Admiral King a copy of the dispatch. King, the first Chief of Naval Operations ever empowered with authority over the naval bureaus by virtue of Roosevelt’s March 12, 1942 Executive Order 9096, “lit a blowtorch under the Bureau of Ordnance,” ordering them to conduct a thorough investigation. Not surprisingly, the bureau discovered that Lockwood was right. On August 1 the Bureau informed the submarine commands that the Mark 14 did indeed run deep and in late 1942 it issued instructions for correcting the problem. However, nothing was said about the destroyers’ Mark 15.

With the Mark 14 running closer to its prescribed depth, the submariners began to achieve more success. But they also experienced more frequent premature explosions

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and still many unexplainable misses. These frustrations gave credence to their second suspicion about the Mark 14 – that the magnetic influence exploder was defective. The Bureau of Ordnance, as always, refused to believe that its secret weapon was flawed. And given the torpedo shortage in the first year of the war, Lockwood and other senior officers resisted the skippers’ requests to disable the magnetic device because reverting to conventional attacks would require a greater expenditure of torpedoes to sink large vessels. (Some skippers disobeyed regulations and secretly disabled the device while at sea.\textsuperscript{209})

In May 1943 Nimitz finally conceded that numerous incidences of duds and detonations short of the target by the Mark 14s prevented U.S. submarines from sinking many of the enemy merchantmen brought under fire. In his monthly report to King he wrote that “Malfunctioning of the torpedo exploder is one of the most pressing problems in submarine operations.” Until an improved exploder could be issued, he gave instructions for the inactivation of the magnetic device on a “representative number of torpedoes” and allowed the minimum depth settings to be reduced.\textsuperscript{210}

Inexplicably, Nimitz maintained his faith in the reliability of the Mark 15. In February 1943 a pair of U.S. destroyers attempted to dispatch a crippled Japanese freighter in the North Pacific. Of the six torpedoes fired, one passed under the target, two missed, two exploded prematurely and another malfunctioned.\textsuperscript{211} The destroyers therefore resorted to gunfire to sink the wounded vessel. In his May report, Nimitz called

\textsuperscript{209} Blair, \textit{Silent Victory}, 206.

\textsuperscript{210} Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report on Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – February 1943, May 11, 1943, 13, Record Group 334, Box 367, National Archive II, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{211} O’Hara, \textit{U.S. Navy Against the Axis}, 152.
this incident “unsatisfactory.” Yet, in the paragraph following his criticism of the Mark 14 exploder mentioned above, Nimitz did not blame the destroyer weapon, but attributed these torpedo problems to “control errors” (i.e., personnel failures) and shallow depth settings.\textsuperscript{212} He therefore instructed U.S. destroyer skippers to conduct daily torpedo control drills and more frequent firing practices.

The magnetic exploder controversy reached a climax in the summer of 1943 after some of Lockwood’s ace submarine skippers returned to base angrily reporting more premature explosions and silence following shots that could not possibly have missed. With more and more of his captains disabling the magnetic feature on their own, Lockwood finally went to Nimitz for resolution. Under Lockwood’s urging, the Pacific Fleet commander ordered the deactivation of the magnetic influence exploder on all Mark 14 and Mark 15 torpedoes on July 24, 1943.\textsuperscript{213}

With the abandonment of under-the-hull attacks, the faulty contact exploder soon became apparent. With better depth control and torpedoes fired to hit, submarine captains now reported many incidences of hearing thuds, but no explosions. The turning point came in July and August when two skippers each crippled a tanker, but were unable to finish them off after firing nine and eleven torpedoes at point-blank range.\textsuperscript{214} When these incidents were reported to Lockwood, he ordered live torpedoes to be fired against cliffs near Pearl Harbor. The duds were then examined, revealing the flawed firing pin guides. With the correction of this defect, the navy finally gained a reliable torpedo. But

\textsuperscript{212} Nimitz, Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – February 1943, May 11, 1943, 13.


\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 108; Ibid., 436-437.
it had taken twenty-one months of war before this was finally achieved. The Bureau of Ordnance deserves most of the blame for steadfastly ignoring the complaints of the operational forces. But Nimitz shares some culpability too. Even if he can be forgiven for discounting the complaints of his submariners, Nimitz should have realized a problem existed given the number of times destroyer torpedoes failed to dispatch friendly cripples. Nimitz’s slow response in this regard was his greatest failing as commander of the Pacific Fleet and was a factor in the navy’s poor showing on the night of November 12-13 when not a single American torpedo struck home.

In assessing the four day Battle of Guadalcanal, which included two surface actions, three reinforcement runs, a naval bombardment and many air strikes by both sides, Admiral Turner stated that it was a great victory won by determined men against heavy odds.²¹⁵ Strategically speaking, it was an American victory. In February 1943 Nimitz wrote that “In 4 days, the fate of Guadalcanal and the fate of our campaign in the South Pacific for months to come were decided.”²¹⁶ Never again would Japan challenge America’s control of Henderson Field. Although three months of jungle fighting remained before Guadalcanal was entirely in friendly hands, the outcome was no longer in doubt.

But America’s victory in this naval battle had come at a heavy cost. Two task groups were put out of commission, with most of their ships either sunk or in need of major repairs. Only three of the nineteen warships engaged (destroyers *Fletcher* and *O’Bannon* and the battleship *Washington*) remained fit for action. On the other hand, of

²¹⁵ Richmond K. Turner, Report of Operations of Task Force 67, December 3, 1942, 18, Record Group 38, Box 538, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

²¹⁶ Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, February 18, 1943, 25.
the twenty-two Japanese ships that took part in the two surface encounters (six of which fought in both actions), fourteen emerged unscathed. During this four-day period the U.S. Navy delivered 6,000 troops and their equipment safely to Guadalcanal, prevented the Japanese from doing the same and twice protected Henderson Field from a battleship bombardment. But the navy had suffered heavy losses in the process. Much work remained to be done if the navy were to acquire a proficiency in nighttime combat.

The Battle of Tassafaronga

The flurry of activity around Guadalcanal from November 11-15 was followed by a lull at sea for the rest of the month. With bright moonlight illuminating the night skies in the second half of November, the Japanese temporarily suspended all naval operations, including runs of the “Tokyo Express.”

Admiral Yamamoto now favored an evacuation of Guadalcanal to end the costly attrition his fleet was suffering in trying to support the Japanese soldiers on the island.\footnote{Stewart, Guadalcanal, 134.} If these losses continued, he feared that the Combined Fleet might not have the strength to win the decisive battle with the U. S. Navy that he believed would soon take place. However, the Imperial Headquarters staff in Tokyo did not wish to abandon Guadalcanal just yet. It made plans for another build-up, to be followed by a major effort to recapture Henderson Field in January. For the time being, the Japanese high command recognized that the primary challenge confronting it in the southern Solomons was the delivery of supplies to the troops already on Guadalcanal.

Desperate to victual their soldiers, the Japanese experimented with a variety of schemes. One method involved the movement of provisions via barges. These self-
propelled vessels steamed south during the night and hid in small coves during the day. Unfortunately for the Japanese, American air strikes against the barges at anchor frustrated the delivery of significant quantities of stores. With the plight of their soldiers growing worse by the day, the Japanese resorted to transporting goods to Guadalcanal by submarine. But harassment by American PT boats and the inadequate carrying capacity of the submersible craft prevented sufficient quantities of food from reaching the starving soldiers.

By the end of November, with a more favorable lunar period at hand, the Japanese prepared to reinstate a modified version of their old nocturnal destroyer runs. To hasten the process of cargo disembarkation, the Japanese came up with the idea of packing food into sanitized metal drums, leaving enough air space to ensure buoyancy. This would allow the destroyer crews to simply push the supplies overboard, thereby dispensing with the arduous and time-consuming task of unloading the provisions into boats. The headquarters staff at Rabaul decreed that the soldiers operating from small beach craft on Guadalcanal should be ready to come out and pull the tethered containers to shore. The 8th Fleet’s officers hoped that the expeditious nature of this method would reduce the destroyers’ exposure to attacks from PT boats and aircraft.

The first supply run employing this new technique was to be conducted by Admiral Tanaka’s Destroyer Squadron 2. On the evening of November 29, the venerable “Tokyo Express” commander gathered together eight destroyers at Shortland Island. Tanaka proceeded to divide his squadron into three groups. The *Naganami* (Tanaka’s flagship) and the *Takanami* made up the Screening Unit. As the designated escorts, neither of these ships carried any supplies. The six remaining vessels comprised the
transport units. Transport Unit One, commanded by Captain Torajiro Sato, included the destroyers *Oyashio*, *Kuroshio*, *Kagero* and *Makinami*. Transport Unit Two, commanded by Captain Giichiro Nakahara, included the destroyers *Kawakaze* and *Suzukaze*. Each of these six ships carried 200-240 food- and medicine-packed drums. In order to accommodate this extra “baggage,” these vessels had to leave behind their reload torpedoes, reducing their arsenal of “Long Lances” by half.218

Tanaka led his squadron out to sea just after midnight on the morning of November 30. Hoping to avoid detection, he steered his vessels east of his customary route down the “Slot,” planning to arrive off Guadalcanal the following evening.

In late November, Halsey, who had recently been promoted to full admiral, directed Admiral Kinkaid to take command of a cruiser-destroyer task force at Espiritu Santo and prepare to prevent any Japanese reinforcement efforts to Guadalcanal. Kinkaid had seen a lot of action lately, having commanded a cruiser division at the Battle of Midway and the *Enterprise* carrier group since the beginning of the Guadalcanal campaign. In consultation with officers fresh from the Savo Sound encounters, Kinkaid proceeded to devise a plan that sought to eliminate many of the errors committed by American naval units in the past. On November 27, three days after assuming command of Task Force 67, he completed his task. To forestall the control problems experienced by Admirals Scott and Callaghan, Kinkaid divided his six cruisers into three two-ship groups, each commanded by a flag officer embarked in a vessel equipped with SG radar. The eight destroyers would similarly be led by divisional commanders in SG radar-equipped flagships.

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218  Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 825.
To reduce fire hazard and unwanted illumination, no ship would go into action with float planes aboard. Two aircraft from each cruiser would be flown off to Tulagi while en route to Savo Sound, where they would be called upon to take off and illuminate the enemy at the appropriate time. Any remaining observation craft would be left behind in Espiritu Santo. In addition, the use of searchlights was forbidden and the flashing of recognition lights was to be done only if a ship suspected that it was being fired upon by a friendly vessel. The use of star shells was authorized only if radar and aircraft flares failed to provide adequate points of aim.

In a departure with past practice, Kinkaid also intended to detach his destroyers from his cruiser line. The destroyers would form their own column 4,000 yards off the main body’s engaged bow. From this position Kinkaid believed they would be in an ideal position to launch a radar-directed surprise torpedo strike. After torpedoes were fired the destroyers would peel away, both to prevent being mistaken for the enemy and to clear the cruisers’ line-of-fire, then join in the ensuing gun battle.

Although the plan did not specifically state it, it appears that Kinkaid planned to withhold his gunfire until the destroyers’ torpedoes had been given the opportunity to reach their targets. Once this occurred, the cruisers would open fire with radar solutions, employing normal fire distribution (i.e., each ship firing at the vessel opposite it). But they would do so from a range of 10,000 - 12,000 yards, and be sure to never allow the range to drop below 6,000 yards (the range of the Mark 15 on its high-speed setting). By keeping the enemy at arms-length, Kinkaid hoped to protect his cruisers from Japanese torpedoes, which had proven so deadly in the past.\footnote{Thomas C. Kinkaid, Task Force 67 Operation Plan No. 1-42, November 27, 1942, Record Group 38, Box 241, National Archives II, College Park, MD.}
Kinkaid’s battle plan was well-conceived and clearly reflected his efforts to avoid the mistakes of his predecessors. Unfortunately for the United States, Admiral King ordered Kinkaid to Pearl Harbor on November 28 in preparation for his re-assignment to the North Pacific Fleet, leaving Rear Admiral Carleton H. Wright in charge of Task Force 67. At the time, this did not seem to pose a problem. Wright, after all, had been a cruiser commander screening the carriers since the beginning of the campaign and had been assigned to Task Force 67 with Kinkaid. He also worked on the plan with Kinkaid and thoroughly approved of it. But as events would demonstrate, Wright would have little luck in executing the plan successfully.

On November 29 American code breakers determined that the Japanese planned a supply run to Guadalcanal the following night. They predicted that it would be conducted by eight Japanese destroyers and six fast transports. After a quick conference with his staff and ship captains, Wright led his task force out of Espiritu Santo’s harbor near midnight on the night of November 29-30, about a half an hour before Tanaka’s ships got underway. With only five of his cruisers available, Wright took direct command of three of them – heavy cruisers *Minneapolis* (flagship), *New Orleans* and *Pensacola*. Second-in-command Rear Admiral Mahlon Tisdale followed directly behind with light cruiser *Honolulu* and heavy cruiser *Northampton*. With half his destroyers away and no squadron commander on hand, Wright placed his four destroyers under the control of the senior skipper, Commander William Cole in the *Fletcher*. Like Commander Fraser on the night of November 14-15, Cole had the responsibility of

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220 Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, February 15, 1943, 3, Record Group 38, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
running his own ship as well as directing a contingent of vessels that had not previously operated together.\textsuperscript{221}

With no time to spare, Wright took his formation northward at maximum speed. Because U.S. intelligence ascertained the enemy’s intention at the last moment, Halsey was compelled to order Wright to proceed to Savo Sound via the most direct route – through the eastern passage. As he headed north Wright wished he had been given the time to approach Guadalcanal from the west, where he could intercept his foe north of the constricting waters of “Iron Bottom Sound,” as Scott had done at the Battle of Cape Esperance.

On the morning of November 30, Tanaka’s lookouts spied an American reconnaissance plane. But the pilot must not have seen the eight destroyers below because he sent no report to Halsey’s headquarters. Wright’s only verification of the cryptologists’ prediction was a report received from a coast watcher that Shortland Harbor was missing a dozen destroyer masts from the prior day.\textsuperscript{222} On the afternoon of November 30, Halsey informed Wright that his enemy might be composed entirely of destroyers, which was in fact the case.

As he steamed northward, Wright signaled some last minute instructions to his skippers. Among other things, he reminded them that the enemy force was likely to be composed of eight destroyers and six transports, which would attempt to land troops at Tassafaronga. Besides setting the recognition light sequence for the night and reiterating the deployment instructions for the force once it entered Savo Sound, he stated that

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 5.
“Situation will probably not permit withholding gun fire to complete torpedo attack.”

He gave no reason for this last pronouncement, but it revealed his low regard for the preliminary destroyer attack, which he apparently believed not important enough to delay the opening of gunfire for even a few minutes.

Tanaka, too, had some idea of what awaited him in Savo Sound. After an aerial scout reported twelve American destroyers and nine transports off Guadalcanal, the admiral warned his task force to be prepared for a surface action that night. In the event of such an encounter Tanaka instructed his squadron to abandon the supply mission and attack the enemy with torpedoes. To help ensure stealth, the destroyer commander forbade the use of gunfire and searchlights, planning instead to rely on the enemy’s gunfire flashes to guide his torpedoes.

About an hour before midnight the Japanese column slipped into Savo Sound from the north. As Tanaka’s flagship and the six supply vessels hugged the northern coast of Guadalcanal, the Takanami moved off to the east to screen the others.

As Task Force 67 negotiated the eastern channel entrance to Savo Sound it nearly collided with a small transport group retiring on a reciprocal course. Halsey had earlier ordered that two of its escorting destroyers – the Lamson and Lardner under the command of division leader Laurence Abercrombie – join Wright’s formation. Without

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223 Carlton Wright, Task Force 67 Action Report, December 9, 1942, 4, Record Group 38, Box 241, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

224 Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 825.

225 Morison, Struggle for Guadalcanal, 301.
The Battle of Tassafaronga
November 30 - December 1, 1942

Map 6. The Battle of Tassafaronga
the time to inform these latecomers of the situation or his intentions, Wright simply directed them to fall in astern of his cruisers.

Upon entering Savo Sound at 2225 Wright ordered his task force to deploy into its battle dispositions. The *Fletcher* took the lead, followed closely by the destroyers *Perkins, Maury* and *Drayton*. Flagship *Minneapolis* steamed 4,000 yards off the *Drayton*’s starboard quarter, followed by the *New Orleans, Pensacola, Honolulu* and *Northampton*. The clueless *Lamson* and *Lardner* followed the *Northampton*. Wright directed his two columns to steam toward Tassafaronga, one of the usual disembarkation points for the “Tokyo Express.”

At 2306 the SG radar on Wright’s flagship detected an enemy presence 23,000 yards away to the northwest.\(^{226}\) The contact eventually separated into eight distinctive “pips,” although the one farthest from Guadalcanal’s coast generated the most discernable echo. Two minutes after the discovery Wright signaled for the westbound destroyer and cruiser groups to turn to the northwest, roughly paralleling their adversary’s opposite course. Six minutes later the admiral tacked his cruisers 20 degrees to the left, bringing them closer to the enemy and nearly aligning them with the destroyer column two miles ahead.

At 2315 Cole, on the lead destroyer *Fletcher*, requested permission to unleash his group’s torpedoes. Although he could not see his enemy 7,000 yards away, his SG radar informed him that his opponent was approaching his port beam.\(^{227}\) Firing now would

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\(^{227}\) William M. Cole, USS *Fletcher* Action Report, December 3, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 241, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
permit the torpedoes to strike the Japanese warships at a perpendicular angle, when they would be at their closest point to the American destroyers.

Steaming well behind the *Fletcher*, Wright believed the enemy was still too distant and refused Cole’s request, radioing “Range on bogies is excessive at present.”\(^\text{228}\)

Cole waited impatiently as his ideal firing angle evaporated. Wright, meanwhile, continued to dither, repeatedly checking his radar plot and querying Cole about his target. Finally, at 2320, Wright told Cole to go ahead and fire torpedoes.\(^\text{229}\)

With permission granted at last, Cole radioed the van destroyers to “Execute William” (fire torpedoes). The *Fletcher* fired all ten of its torpedoes and the *Perkins* fired its eight. Without an SG radar set, the *Maury* was unable to locate any targets and therefore withheld its fire. On the *Drayton* the radar operator calculated a target speed of zero. The suspicious skipper authorized the firing of only two “fish” at what he figured was probably a land formation. But these twenty torpedoes had little chance of reaching their targets. By the time Wright had given his approval to fire, the Japanese ships had already passed Cole’s beam. The torpedoes were therefore obliged to chase a quarry that was moving steadily away. With a poor angle and a lengthening range, no missile found its mark.

Having swerved his cruisers behind the destroyers and then wasting five minutes before authorizing the torpedo strike, Wright discovered that the range to his enemy had dropped below 10,000 yards and was slipping further. Fearing that his radar advantage

\(^{228}\) Mahlon Tisdale, Task Unit 67.2.3 Action Report, December 6, 1942, Battle Log, unpaged, Record Group 38, Box 241, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

would be nullified before long, Wright gave the order to commence firing before his destroyers had even finished discharging their torpedoes.230

The *Minneapolis* was the first to fire, directing its guns against a radar-determined target only 9,200 yards off the port beam.231 Immediately following the *Minneapolis*’s first salvo the guns of the *New Orleans* and *Northampton* came to life. The former used its SG radar for all its firing solution needs while the latter, without the benefit of the newer scope, made the most of its gunnery radar by directing it toward the enemy’s reported bearing. Difficulties in locking their radars onto a target delayed the first rounds of the *Pensacola* and *Honolulu* a few minutes. To the north, the van destroyers added their five-inch guns to the fireworks. They fired between fifty and one hundred rounds each before their course took them beyond range and out of the battle.232 They then circled clockwise around to the northeast of Savo Island and awaited developments.

With the Japanese still unseen by Task Force 67, the Americans initially directed all their fire against the ship with the most prominent radar signature – the picket ship *Takanami*. The gun directors did not spy their victim until their shells triggered fires aboard the vessel.233 In desperation the Japanese destroyer replied with its guns, contrary to Tanaka’s orders. This merely attracted more American attention. With concentrated firing, the American cruisers battered the *Takanami* into a blazing wreck.

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231 Charles E. Rosendahl, USS *Minneapolis* Action Report, December 6, 1942, 4, Record Group 38, Box 23, National Archives II, College Park, MD.


Unlike the outboard *Takanami*, the seven Japanese destroyers hugging the coastline remained obscure to American eyes and radar. The rise of land behind these ships confused U.S. radar operators and hid their silhouettes from the cruisers’ gun directors. American attempts to improve the visual situation with star shells proved ineffective due to the cloudy conditions and the shortfall of the bursting candles.\(^{234}\) Tulagi’s float planes failed to help. Light winds and a calm sea prevented them from taking off at the designated hour. Lastly, smoke, emanating from the flaming *Takanami* and that being artificially generated by Tanaka’s flagship as a cloaking measure, reduced visibility considerably.

With the *Takanami* virtually pounded into the sea, Wright’s cruisers eventually sought out other targets, without success. Flagship *Naganami*, nearest to *Takanami*, attracted the attention of several American gunners after it too employed gunfire. However, despite being subjected to a deluge of falling shells, Tanaka’s vessel emerged unscathed. The radar-controlled guns directed at the *Naganami* had found the range, but were off in deflection.\(^{235}\)

Without SG radar the appended *Lamson* and *Lardner* in the rear lacked a discernible target. Therefore, when the shooting started, the *Lamson* fired a few star shells in the direction of the splashes. The *Lardner*, which may have been the only American ship to have sighted the four vessels of Captain Sato’s Transport Unit One quietly slipping down the coast, fired three ineffectual salvos before commotion among the cruisers in front forced the ship to undertake evasive maneuvers. The destroyer

\(^{234}\) Frank L. Lowe, USS *Pensacola* Action Report, December 4, 1942, 3, Record Group 38, Box 23, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\(^{235}\) Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 826.
subsequently lost contact with its enemy. In the confusion, both the Lamson and Lardner came under friendly fire. Not having been informed of the proper recognition light sequence, they were unable to identify themselves to the satisfaction of their assailants, prompting both to withdraw to the east.

Without radar the Japanese depended upon the eyesight of their lookouts to alert them of any danger. Fortunately for Tanaka, optically-assisted Japanese eyes could see over twice as far into the murky night as American ones. Wright reported visibility on this night to be no more than two miles, while Tanaka reckoned it to be over four. Lookouts on picket ship Takanami validated Tanaka’s estimate when they spotted Wright’s cruiser column at a range of over 7,000 yards (four miles) between 2312 and 2316. In a few minutes other vessels confirmed this sighting. By now the two Japanese transport units had begun to draw apart and were preparing to push their supply drums into the water at their designated locations. Tanaka interrupted these proceedings and radioed “Stop unloading. Take battle stations.” When the American gunfire erupted shortly thereafter, he ordered “Close and attack!”

While flagship Naganami and the Takanami responded immediately, Captain Sato calmly continued to lead his Transport Unit One southeastwardly along the Guadalcanal coast, abstaining from gunfire and fast speed to help keep his ships undetected. After slipping past the geysers erupting around the Takanami, Sato wheeled his division around and set about determining a firing solution, which the blazing American muzzles facilitated. After a few minutes his four vessels launched a swarm of torpedoes toward

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237 Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 826; Frank, Guadalcanal, 507.
238 Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 826.
the American cruisers. Transport Unit Two, farther up the coast, had earlier reversed course and fired a spread of “Long Lances” as well. Within twelve minutes of the opening salvo the Japanese had forty-four “fish” swimming toward Wright’s battle line.239

The lead cruiser Minneapolis was the first to feel the sting of Tanaka’s riposte. At 2327, after nearly seven minutes of firing on its unchanged heading, two torpedoes struck the flagship. The first warhead exploded just forward of turret number one, causing the ship’s bow to fold over to the left and dangle below the waterline. The inverted section acted like a giant dipper, scooping up the sea as the ship moved ahead. The second missile detonated near a fire room, sending sheets of flame high into the air. Incredibly, the Minneapolis’s main batteries replied twice more after this incident, much to the joy of its crew. But after the eleventh salvo, the forward turrets lost power, silencing the ship’s eight-inch guns.240

A few seconds after the double eruption on the flagship, a “Long Lance” slammed into the port bow of the New Orleans. The torpedo detonated two forward magazines and a gasoline storage tank, magnifying the blast. Unlike the Minneapolis’s experience, the explosion blew off the New Orleans’s bow completely. The ship then ran over the detached section, damaging the cruiser’s propellers in the process.241 The great size of

239 Frank, Guadalcanal, 510.
240 Rosendahl, Minneapolis Action Report, 5-6.
241 Clifford H. Roper, USS New Orleans Action Report, December 4, 1942, 6, Record Group 38, Box 23, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
the amputated portion convinced topside sailors aft of the superstructure that their ship had trampled the sinking Minneapolis.\footnote{242 Morison, \textit{Struggle for Guadalcanal}, 304.}

With the speed of the Minneapolis and New Orleans reduced to a few knots, the next ship in line, the Pensacola, swerved left to get around the crippled pair. Overlooking the fact that his heavy cruiser would be silhouetted by such a maneuver, Captain Frank L. Lowe chose this course in order to prevent his gunfire from being interrupted. Given the condition of the two cruisers he sought to bypass, Lowe believed that he would not have to worry about blocking their line of fire.\footnote{243 Lowe, \textit{Pensacola} Action Report, 3.} To Lowe’s surprise, one of the flagship’s last two salvos brushed across his masts, causing him momentary anxiety.

Lowe’s close encounter with friendly fire should have been the least of his concerns. Having been silhouetted by the burning ships to his right, the Pensacola became the next target for Japanese torpedomen. Foolishly returning to the same course after circumventing the wounded cruisers, the Pensacola became Tanaka’s third victim at 2339. A torpedo struck an oil tank, spreading flammable liquid throughout the ship, causing intense fires. Partly due to the destruction of some fire mains, the Pensacola’s crew did not extinguish the ensuing oil fire until seven hours later.\footnote{244 Ibid.}

The next ship in line, the Honolulu, owed its salvation to good luck and the skill of its captain, Robert W. Hayler. Unlike Lowe, he conned his ship to starboard, passing to the right of the burning Minneapolis and New Orleans. Ringing up more speed, he artfully maneuvered his responsive light cruiser through the torpedo water, “exploiting
the ability of this type to maintain accurate and rapid fire under such circumstances.”

Hayler continued his ship’s gunfire until he neared Savo Island, when he lost contact with the enemy. Like the van destroyers before him, he then led his ship clockwise around to the northeastern side of Savo Island.

The last cruiser was the Northampton. Although Captain Willard A. Kitts followed the Honolulu to starboard, he neither increased his ship’s speed nor engaged in any radical maneuvering. As he swung the Northampton back to the base course, two torpedoes smacked against the ship’s hull at 2348. As had occurred on the Pensacola, serious fires ensued when the torpedoes exploded near an oil tank. The ship took an immediate list of ten degrees, which quickly increased to twenty, then thirty-five, degrees.

Meanwhile, Wright’s float planes from Tulagi had finally gotten airborne and began dropping flares over the battle zone. But with the battle virtually over, these descending torches served only to make the topside personnel aboard the disabled cruisers fearful that they were being illuminated for the enemy.

Fortunately for the Americans this extra incandescence failed to help the Japanese with their final torpedo attacks. Despite the vulnerability of the stricken cruisers, the last “Long Lances” missed their mark. With his destroyers having expended all their torpedoes, Tanaka ordered his vessels to retire. His supply mission remained unfulfilled.

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245 Robert Hayler, USS Honolulu Action Report, December 4, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 241, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

246 Willard A. Kitts, USS Northampton Action Report, December 5, 1942, 1-2, Record Group 38, Box 23, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

247 Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 827.
With the Japanese gone, the Americans endeavored to save their heavy cruisers. It was a forlorn hope for the crew of the *Northampton*. With his ship’s list increasing to forty-five degrees and getting worse, Captain Kitts realized the situation could not be rectified and ordered the ship abandoned. At 0304 the *Northampton* rolled over and sank. \(^{248}\)

With the *Minneapolis* continuing to take on water, Captain Charles Rosendahl steered his ship toward Lunga Point with the intention of abandoning or beaching it off the American-held coastline. However, on the way to Guadalcanal the *Minneapolis*’s condition appeared to stabilize, encouraging Rosendahl to attempt to reach the sanctuary of Tulagi harbor instead. Despite minimal power and helm control, the ship arrived a few miles off the harbor entrance by early morning, where it was met by a tugboat that put its salvage pump to work at once. \(^{249}\)

Bereft of one-fifth of his ship after the torpedo hit, Captain Clifford H. Roper ordered the *New Orleans* to head for Tulagi too. With the bow gone and the forward part of the vessel low in the water, the ship painstakingly drove toward its refuge at a slow two knots. With the helm barely responding, manipulation of the engines provided the primary means of steering control. Although the ship eventually accelerated to five knots, the *New Orleans*’s laborious trek did not end in Tulagi Harbor until 0610. \(^{250}\)


Although the *Pensacola* had to battle raging fires all night, its one intact fire and engine room provided it with a cruising speed of eight knots.\(^{251}\) Like the *Minneapolis* and *New Orleans*, the *Pensacola* set course for Tulagi, arriving in the harbor at 0344.

With the battle over, the *Honolulu* and the van destroyers returned to “Iron Bottom Sound” after their pointless reconnaissance along the northeastern side of Savo Island. After picking up the crew of the *Northampton* and rendering assistance to the other cruisers, they withdrew to Espiritu Santo.

Assessment of the Battle

Except for the disaster at the Battle of Savo Island, the final naval encounter in the struggle for Guadalcanal proved to be the U.S. Navy’s worst tactical defeat of the Solomons campaign. Of course, the extent of the defeat was not recognized at the time since Wright estimated Japan’s losses to consist of two light cruisers and seven destroyers.\(^{252}\) King called this “a considerable over estimate,” while Nimitz (with the aid of some intelligence) reckoned that the enemy probably lost four destroyers and had two others damaged.\(^{253}\) (Concerned about his ability to accurately determine the enemy’s naval strength in the theater of operations, Nimitz issued a secret letter to the fleet on December 20 cautioning commanders against exaggerating enemy losses.\(^{254}\)) But even Nimitz’s more informed estimate was overly optimistic. Despite American reports of many enemy ships set afire, Wright’s task force had only sunk the destroyer *Takanami*

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\(^{252}\) Wright, Task Force 67 Action Report, December 9, 1942, 10.


and had failed to damage any of the other seven present. With the loss of the heavy cruiser *Northampton* and the crippling of three others (all of which would be out of action for nearly a year), Wright’s force had been routed by a smaller unit that had been taken by surprise.

The primary cause of this American defeat was, as usual, Japan’s effective use of its torpedoes and the U.S. Navy’s poor employment of its weapons. The Americans, of course, were well aware that their losses were attributable to enemy torpedoes, which some officers speculated contained far more explosive power than the navy’s Mark 15.\(^{255}\) But the officers of Task Force 67 were unsure exactly how they had come to suffer such a blow. At no time, stated Wright, had the enemy come within 6,000 yards of his force. The perplexed admiral wrote that “the observed positions of the enemy surface vessels before and during the gun action makes it seem improbable that torpedoes with speed-distance characteristics similar to our own could have reached the cruisers at the time they did…”\(^{256}\) He nonetheless conceded that the *Minneapolis* and *New Orleans* were probably hit by torpedoes fired from the destroyers being engaged. But given his cruisers’ “excellent” gunnery performance, which he said was responsible for sinking nearly every vessel brought under fire, he could not account for the torpedo hits against the *Pensacola* and *Northampton*, which occurred twelve and twenty-one minutes, respectively, after the first two were hit. Wright agreed with the skippers of these ships who contended that they had probably been hit by torpedoes fired by one or more enemy submarines. After all, wrote Wright, the enemy could not have predicted the maneuvers


made by these two cruisers as they circumvented the stricken *Minneapolis* and *New Orleans*. Therefore, they must have been the victims of lucky, long-range shots fired by an unseen submarine (or two).²⁵⁷

Given the past devastation inflicted on U.S. ships by Japanese surface-launched torpedoes, it is surprising that King and Halsey gave credence to this submarine explanation.²⁵⁸ Here was more evidence that the Japanese possessed a weapon with “speed-distance characteristics” far superior to the Mark 15, yet the senior commanders refused to recognize such a possibility. Nimitz, who wrote that Wright “opened fire at a range that should have permitted avoiding (a) surprise torpedo attack,” was nevertheless somewhat skeptical of the submarine hypothesis.²⁵⁹ Instead, he merely conceded that the Japanese, yet again, had employed their torpedoes to great effect. But he offered no remedies to prevent such incidents from reoccurring in the future. King, at least, proffered that the solution to this danger lay in speed, which he said was a cruiser’s primary defense against torpedo attacks.²⁶⁰ Wright’s cruisers, after all, had been steaming at a sluggish 20 knots when they were hit. And it was the light cruiser *Honolulu* that had avoided any damage after accelerating to 30 knots. Surprisingly, neither King nor Nimitz commented on the fact that the *Pensacola* and *Northampton* reported being struck by torpedoes after returning to (or close to) the original course following their swing around the crippled *Minneapolis* and *New Orleans*. Nor did the

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 10.
²⁵⁸ King, Battle Experience, April 15, 1943, Chapter 31, 25; William Halsey, SOPAC Action Report, February 20, 1943, 2, Record Group 38, Box 241, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
²⁶⁰ King, Battle Experience, April 15, 1943, Chapter 31, 7.
commanders in chief comment on the recommendation made by the *Pensacola’s* Captain Lowe that future cruiser forces should engage in zigzagging and frequent changes in base course.\(^{261}\)

If Nimitz appeared somewhat resigned toward Japanese torpedo prowess, he was quite dissatisfied with the American destroyers’ failure to achieve similar success. “In no night action,” he stated, “has our destroyers’ major offensive strength, the torpedo, been used effectively.”\(^{262}\) But instead of blaming Wright for holding up the torpedo attack for five critical minutes, he condemned Cole for failing to bring his destroyers close enough to the enemy. As Nimitz saw it, Wright was correct in holding back Cole until the range was reduced. King, too, subscribed to this notion, writing that “The OTC (Officer in Tactical Command) must exercise general control when to launch the torpedo attack.”\(^{263}\) (This is a perplexing statement from King since it contradicts what he said only three weeks earlier regarding the November 12-13 encounter. In his report on that battle he wrote that destroyer leaders should not have to seek permission from the task force commander to execute a torpedo attack. Skippers should be able to strike targets of opportunity as soon as the firing solution is solved.\(^{264}\))

Obviously, King, Nimitz and Wright were unaware that each minute of delay actually increased the length of the torpedo run. Cole was partly to blame for the criticism he endured. By declining to question Wright’s judgment or adequately explain


\(^{262}\) Nimitz, CINCPAC Action Report, February 15, 1943, 15.

\(^{263}\) King, Battle Experience, April 15, 1943, Chapter 31, 5.

\(^{264}\) King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 14, 46, 65.
the situation in his report, his superiors came away with a faulty understanding of the circumstances. Cole failed to make it clear that he had a perfect beam shot when he first requested permission to fire. Nor did he mention that when he was finally given permission to fire, his quarry had already passed his perpendicular, leaving him with a poor firing angle and long range shot toward his rear. Instead, he merely wrote that when he fired, his torpedoes would have to travel between 8,200 and 9,600 yards to strike their targets. As a result of Cole’s disinclination to be frank, Nimitz lambasted him for firing at excessive range, writing that “Torpedo firing ranges at night of more than 4,000-5,000 yards are not acceptable.” Nimitz failed to realize that Cole was not responsible for this since his movements were under the direction of Wright, until the flagship was disabled. Wright, of course, neither blamed himself for delaying the attack nor for not unleashing the destroyers to allow Cole to lead the attack as he saw fit. Thus, once again U.S. destroyers were constrained by the battle line commander, thereby thwarting any chance for a successful torpedo attack.

In light of the fact that Nimitz had recently written that the navy should exploit its radar advantage to the maximum, it is strange that he criticized Cole for not bringing his destroyers to within 4,000 yards of his opponent before firing. Closing to such a range would have revealed the destroyers’ presence to the enemy. On the other hand, had Cole been allowed to fire when he wanted to, his 6,000-7,000 yard radar-directed torpedo attack would have come as a surprise to the enemy since the Japanese had not spotted the American destroyers. Ironically, in his report to King on the November 11-15


266 Nimitz, CINCPAC Action Report, February 15, 1943, 12.
engagement, Nimitz had recommended that U.S. warships employ radar solutions in order to open gunfire beyond visual range.\textsuperscript{267} Nimitz thus criticized Cole for adhering to this principle with regard to torpedo fire.

Cole also endured the displeasure of Halsey, who condemned him for failing to “assist the cruisers” after the torpedo attack, as called for in the battle plan. Although the destroyers did engage in some gunfire, it was relatively brief, and ineffective. In Cole’s defense, he had kept his destroyers firing for as long as they could, ceasing only after losing contact. Although Cole could have reversed course to rejoin the action, his decision to continue northward and stay out of the cruisers’ way was probably prudent given what happened to the \textit{Lamson} and \textit{Lardner}, not to mention the \textit{Duncan} at the Battle of Cape Esperance. As Cole explained, he retired from the action at 2327 “in accordance with doctrine,” eventually setting a clockwise course around Savo Island and patrolling the channel on the eastern side of the island.\textsuperscript{268} Although U.S. Navy doctrine states that the primary task of destroyers after completing their torpedo runs is to get clear of the enemy as quickly as possible, this does not necessarily give them permission to leave the battle.\textsuperscript{269} While the regulations leave some room for discretion, destroyers completing their torpedo attacks are generally expected to fall back toward the battle line to assist with its defense.\textsuperscript{270} This is especially true if the enemy is composed of destroyers, which are ideal targets for five-inch guns. Nimitz agreed with Halsey, writing that Cole should

\textsuperscript{267} Nimitz, CINCPAC Action Report, February 18, 1943, 22.

\textsuperscript{268} Cole, \textit{Fletcher} Action Report, December 3, 1942, 3.

\textsuperscript{269} Commander Destroyers, Battle Force, Current Tactical Orders, Destroyers, 1940, 18, Command File, World War II, Box 273, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.

\textsuperscript{270} War Instructions, United States Navy, 1934, 92.
have kept his destroyers near Savo Sound’s northwestern exit, rather than circling around to the eastern side of Savo Island. The destroyers would then have been ideally positioned to strike the retiring enemy.  

Although Cole endured much criticism for his conduct, Wright, surprisingly, did not. As Nimitz saw it, American forces made only three errors in this engagement, two of which he believed were not Wright’s fault. As mentioned, the first mistake was the destroyers’ ineffective torpedo attack. The second was the failure of the float planes to provide the cruisers with useful illumination. Sea and wind conditions prevented their timely takeoff and pilot inexperience prevented them from releasing their flares far enough behind the Japanese column. Lastly, Nimitz believed that excessive TBS chatter had been responsible for disclosing their presence to the Japanese. Although sailors captured from the sunken _Takanami_ claimed that their lookouts had sighted the Americans before the commencement of gunfire, Nimitz refused to believe this and instead blamed their foreknowledge on intercepted radio messages from Task Force 67. Except for these three mistakes, said Nimitz, “the conduct of the battle was correct,” adding that “the fortunes of war and the restricted waters…caused our ships to suffer greater loss than their leadership and action merited, and prevented them from inflicting heavier damage on the enemy.”  

In short, by absolving Wright of virtually any wrongdoing and unfairly criticizing Cole, Nimitz hampered the navy’s progress in developing an effective destroyer attack doctrine and a means of neutralizing the enemy’s torpedo threat.


Nimitz, however, did not attribute the losses in this battle to the fortunes of war and constricted waters alone. Despite a lack of insight on the causes of the poor U.S. destroyer attack, he correctly identified some of the navy’s other troubles. To begin with, he recognized that U.S. air reconnaissance needed improvement. As in the Battle of Savo Island, American scouts failed to detect the oncoming enemy task force. Although pre-battle intelligence turned out to be relatively accurate regarding the composition of the Japanese task force, this could not always be relied on. Nimitz wrote that he expected increased air base facilities for B-17s and PBY flying boats at Guadalcanal and Tulagi to improve the situation.

Nimitz also addressed the visual problem encountered at Tassafaronga, noting that the Japanese made good use of land background to hide their silhouettes and radar signatures from American gunners. Nimitz wrote that this was an unfortunate circumstance caused by time constraints (which made it necessary to meet the enemy in Savo Sound rather than north of it) and by the failure of the float planes to provide effective illumination.\(^\text{273}\) However, he chose not to pass on the suggestion made by Lowe’s gunnery officer that all topside personnel close their eyes just before the guns are fired to prevent the flash from ruining their night vision. According to this officer, this procedure was practiced by the crew of the *Pensacola* with much success.\(^\text{274}\) Although the degree of success is debatable given the poor shooting of the ship, such a stratagem

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\(^{273}\) Ibid., 11-12.

may have helped the crew of the *Minneapolis*, whose captain complained that the blinding effect of his ship’s salvoes made it “extremely difficult” to see the enemy.\(^{275}\)

On the other hand, Nimitz recognized that U.S. gun flashes were aiding the enemy. The commander in chief correctly ascertained that these blazes were facilitating the Japanese in the calculation of their torpedo solutions. The peacetime U.S. Navy had been very proud of the cordite it had developed after World War I. Its special blend of chemicals yielded a propellant that was extremely stable (i.e., less likely to explode if an enemy shell struck the magazine) and relatively smoke-free, a major asset given the daylight duel the navy expected to fight.\(^{276}\) But in suppressing the smoke element, the powder produced a bright flash. Now that the navy was fighting at night, this illumination was a major liability. Nimitz wrote that he would speed distribution of the navy’s new flashless powder to the operational forces as soon as it became available. He hoped that this would help reduce the Japanese underwater threat. (Unfortunately for the U.S. Navy, its flashless powder was still noticeably brighter than that used by the Japanese.)

Although better air reconnaissance and the use of flashless powder would help, perhaps the navy’s biggest requirement at this stage of the campaign (aside from functioning torpedoes) was what Wright termed “permanency of assignment.” He wrote that due to shortages of ships, the navy had been “living from hand to mouth, with far more to do than the tools at hand permitted doing.”\(^{277}\) This situation forced the naval


\(^{276}\) Crenshaw, *Battle of Tassafaronga*, 171-172.

leadership to frequently shuffle ships among various task units, a habit that was harmful to the efficient operation of the combat forces. Wright wrote that task forces composed of vessels haphazardly assembled lacked a “team” spirit that he deemed particularly necessary in nocturnal warfare. Wright also condemned the frequent change in task force commanders prevalent during the Guadalcanal struggle. Said Wright,

A commander rarely has an opportunity to become thoroughly acquainted with his subordinate commanders, to learn their strong points and weaknesses, their reactions to various situations. He has insufficient opportunity to impress his personality upon them and to inform them adequately concerning the action he expects in various possible contingencies. The commanding officers of individual ships do not have the comforting feeling of knowing what the fellow next to them will do when the unexpected happens.\textsuperscript{278}

To help improve the disappointing performance of the navy’s destroyers, he urged that the integrity of destroyer divisions (four ships) and squadrons (two four-ship divisions) be respected. For Wright, the navy’s practice of breaking up destroyer units in order to parcel out their services for various escort missions and other tasks prevented these vessels from operating effectively when called upon to engage an enemy surface force. To remedy this situation, Wright recommended a drastic reduction in escorting duties for destroyers. Although this would leave many non-combatant vessels more vulnerable to enemy submarines and aircraft, he believed this was a worthy price to pay to obtain better destroyer proficiency in nighttime combat.\textsuperscript{279}

Nimitz and King recognized the sagacity of this advice. Both wrote that proper indoctrination of subordinates was impossible given the current state of affairs. Nimitz looked to the recent action in which the van destroyers went to sea without ever having

\textsuperscript{278} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{279} Ibid., 17-18.
operated together as but one egregious example of this situation. To help alleviate this problem, Nimitz took up Wright’s idea and suggested to Halsey that he sharply curtail the assignment of destroyers as transport guardians in order to allow the squadrons the opportunity to assemble and practice the art of night fighting as a cohesive unit. The South Pacific Commander, however, was resistant to sending his supply vessels into harm’s way unscreened. As he saw it, these hardworking crews performing necessary but unglamorous duties deserved a modicum of protection from the fighting navy.280 Nimitz, however, hoped Halsey would not have to choose between these two vital missions much longer. He wrote that new additions to the Pacific Fleet would soon provide the necessary shipping to maintain adequate escorts while allowing divisional commanders the opportunity to undertake extensive exercises in nighttime maneuvers and battle simulations. Nimitz instructed his commanders to drill their squadrons accordingly at every opportunity. He was confident that this would improve the performance of his hitherto underachieving destroyer forces.281

If the Battle of Tassafaronga demonstrated the need to keep divisions together, it also illustrated the folly of appending warships to a task group at the last minute. Halsey’s order for the retiring Lamson and Lardner to join Task Force 67 just before it went into battle was an ill-conceived effort to give Wright some added heft. Without any knowledge of the situation, the battle plan, the expected composition of the enemy or even the task force’s recognition signals, the two destroyers were unprepared for the engagement about to take place. Correctly judging that they were in no condition to join


the van destroyers, Wright simply directed them to fall in astern of the cruisers, where
little was expected of them. Indeed, except for providing assistance to the stricken
cruisers after the battle, the Lamson and Lardner contributed nothing to the battle. Even
worse, both were subjected to friendly fire from Wright’s cruisers, which mistook them
for the enemy. As the pair’s division commander commented afterward, both vessels
were lucky to extricate themselves from the battle zone before being hit. To avoid such a
reoccurrence, he strongly recommended that warships not be added to established
formations at the eleventh hour. As he saw it, the newcomers were “more a hindrance
than a help.”

King wholeheartedly agreed, writing that “It is unsound and a waste of
material to throw forces together just prior to an action with no opportunity for OTC to
issue instructions, doctrine, orders, etc.” He concluded that the navy was “paying
heavily” for this practice.

In at least one respect, however, U.S. naval procedures were paying dividends.
Despite the heavy damage inflicted upon Wright’s cruisers by Japanese “Long Lances,”
three of the four victims survived to fight another day. Although the Americans were
proving to be slow learners in avoiding enemy torpedoes, they were demonstrating an
increased proficiency in limiting their destructiveness. Despite the fact that Japanese
torpedoes ignited serious fires aboard the Minneapolis, New Orleans and Pensacola,
repair parties successfully got them under control before they could do mortal harm.
Captain Roper of the New Orleans credited the prior removal of paint and inflammables

282 Laurence A. Abercrombie, Destroyer Division 9 Action Report, December 4, 1942, 2, Record
Group 38, Box 241, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

283 King, Battle Experience, April 15, 1943, Chapter 31, 6.
as a major factor in the salvation of his warship. As a testimonial to the navy’s efforts to improve warship survivability, the Minneapolis’s Captain Rosendahl gave special thanks to a portable gasoline-driven salvage pump recently received from Pearl Harbor, which he said was instrumental in saving his ship. Despite the humiliation of having four of his five cruisers torpedoed, Wright proudly pointed out that no fires were attributable to the combustion of paint, bedding, clothing or other unnecessary flammables, as in the past. The three cruisers’ fires were all sparked by the ignition of fuel oil or the reserves of diesel and gasoline used to run necessary shipboard machinery. The only discretionary item that caught fire was the aviation fuel for the float planes, which prompted the captain of the Minneapolis to question whether their retention aboard ship was worth the risk.

In the end, Wright concluded that it was the Pacific Fleet’s serious commitment to damage control – specifically its issuance of Confidential Letter 35 on October 7, 1942 (which ordered the removal of paint, linoleum, stuffed furniture and other flammables aboard ship) – that made possible the conditions that saved three of his cruisers. Naval historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, agreed, stating that the Minneapolis, New Orleans and Pensacola would all have been lost if they had sustained their injuries at the Battle of Savo Island.

While the navy had been prompt in instituting better damage control procedures, it was less expeditious in addressing other needs, especially the introduction of radar

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286 Wright, Task Force 67 Action Report (supplement), December 19, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 241, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
287 Morison, Struggle for Guadalcanal, 314-315.
recognition equipment. In his report, Wright called the installation of such a mechanism a “must,” a sentiment shared by both King and Nimitz. Yet the Solomon Island campaign would end before an IFF system was put into place in the fleet. Consequently, proper identification of warships at night would remain a problem for the navy.

On the other hand, the navy would soon make progress toward the fulfillment of another request made by the fighting forces – the installation of duplicate radar scopes on the bridge. These “repeaters,” as they were called, would allow the captain and other bridge personnel to see the radar picture for themselves, freeing them from having to rely on talkers to relay the information to them verbally, which was never satisfactory anyway. The calls for these extra scopes by the participants in this battle were seconded by Nimitz, who recommended that their production be given high priority. Unfortunately for the U.S. Navy, only a fraction of its ships received a duplicate radar scope before the Solomons campaign came to an end.

Of course, for the navy’s equipment to be useful, it had to be functional during the height of battle. In the past some of the more delicate apparatuses tended to become disabled not from enemy shells, but from the concussion of their own guns. It was not uncommon for radars or communications gear to “kick-out” after the commencement of gunfire. On the Honolulu the aft fire control radar and many radio circuits ceased functioning once the main batteries opened up. Nimitz, however, believed that these problems could be solved with better shock-proofing of the antennae and other sensitive parts. He noted with pride that the SG radar of the New Orleans continued to function

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even after a Japanese torpedo blew off its bow. The Commander in Chief attributed this ruggedness to the new antennae mounting procedures prescribed by the Fleet Maintenance Office of the Pacific Fleet.\textsuperscript{290} Although Nimitz hoped that these new measures would make the navy’s sophisticated electronics more reliable, the navy was never able to completely eliminate this problem.

Of course, better mounting of radar antennae was of little benefit if U.S. task forces failed to implement proper fire distribution. Although the battle plan called for a normal distribution of fire (where each ship fires on the vessel opposite it), interference from nearby Guadalcanal prompted most of Task Force 67’s radar-directed gunners to fire on the ship with the most prominent radar signature – the picket destroyer \textit{Takanami}. Witnessing this concentration of gunfire, Executive Officer W.F. Riggs, jr. of the \textit{New Orleans} commented in his post-battle report that he at first believed that no fire distribution plan had been ordered, but admitted that his anxiety was eased when he saw a wider array of splashes shortly afterward.\textsuperscript{291} Unfortunately for the U.S. Navy, Riggs should not have been so quick to dismiss his initial reaction. The truth was that too much gunfire had been concentrated on the \textit{Takanami} for too long. While some gunfire was eventually redirected elsewhere, it was ineffective, with only Tanaka’s flagship \textit{Naganami} endangered by near misses. More importantly, the initial concentration against a single enemy gave Tanaka’s seven other vessels the opportunity to execute an unobstructed torpedo counterattack, with devastating results. Thus, not only was the navy unaware that radar-directed gunfire was not as accurate as believed, it was also

\textsuperscript{290} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{291} W.F. Riggs, \textit{New Orleans} Action Report, December 3, 1942, 1.
oblivious to the fact that such gunfire tended to be concentrated against the target with
the biggest electronic echo. With the action reports of Task Force 67 claiming many
targets taken under fire and sunk, this problem remained hidden from the upper echelons
of command.

With the struggle for Guadalcanal at sea virtually at an end, Admiral Tisdale
(embarked in the light cruiser Honolulu during the engagement) reflected on the various
battles that had taken place in or around Savo Sound since August. He noted that the
light cruisers seemed to have emerged from these engagements in better condition than
the heavy cruisers. Not only was the Honolulu the only cruiser to escape harm in this
battle, but the light cruiser Helena had endured two battles (including the ferocious mêlée
on the night of November 12-12) with only light injuries. He discounted the heavy
damage sustained by the light cruiser Boise at the Battle of Cape Esperance because it
had made the mistake of turning on its searchlight, which attracted a hail of shellfire. On
the other hand, all twelve of the heavy cruisers committed to battle at Guadalcanal had
either been sunk or severely damaged, except for the Salt Lake City, which had only been
moderately damaged at the Battle of Cape Esperance. (Tisdale did not mention the
sunken Atlanta and Juneau, which were anti-aircraft light cruisers armed with destroyer-
sized five-inch guns and were about two-thirds the size of regular light cruisers.) Tisdale
was at a loss to explain why the light cruisers survived the Guadalcanal crucible better
than the heavier ships. But he did theorize that perhaps the light cruisers were better
suited to the type of warfare prevalent in the southern Solomons. He offered two reasons
for this: first, the ability of light cruisers to fire accurately while maneuvering, and
second, their high rate of fire. To be sure, the prewar naval leadership realized that the slow-firing eight-inch-gunned heavy cruisers were not designed to hunt enemy destroyers. In 1933 Scouting (i.e. Cruiser) Force commander Admiral Harris Laning wrote that unlike six-inch guns, “Eight-inch batteries are not well suited for dealing with a multiplicity of fast-moving destroyer targets…” Their slow rate of fire (four rounds per minute) and less sophisticated fire control systems made them relatively incapable of locking on to rapidly maneuvering quarry, especially when the firing ship did not maintain a steady course. On the other hand, the quick-firing six-inch guns (ten shots per minute) and more sophisticated fire control mechanisms aboard the light cruisers made them ideal destroyer killers. Indeed, they were built in the late 1930s primarily to protect the battle line against attacking enemy destroyers. Tisdale respectfully submitted this observation “for what it may be worth.” When Wright read his remarks, he wholeheartedly agreed. Very impressed with the Honolulu’s volume and accuracy of fire, Wright concluded that in the nighttime engagements around Guadalcanal one six-inch-gunned light cruiser was worth at least two eight-inch-gunned heavy cruisers. Although Nimitz did not comment on Tisdale’s reflection, his words may have had an impact on him. When the Guadalcanal campaign ended two months later, Nimitz recalled the few remaining heavy cruisers from the South Pacific for use in the Alaskan

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292 Tisdale, Task Force 67.2.3 Action Report, December 6, 1942, 3-4.
293 Friedman, U.S. Cruisers, 132.
294 Frank, Guadalcanal, 512, 516; Friedman, U.S. Cruisers, 207, 222, 313; Crenshaw, Battle of Tassafaronga, 173; War Instructions, 1934, 90, 120.
295 Tisdale, Task Force 67.2.3 Action Report, December 6, 1942, 4.
296 Wright, Task Force 67 Action Report, December 9, 16.
theater. For 1943 Halsey’s primary naval forces would consist of two light cruiser task groups.

In the end, the Battle of Tassafaronga demonstrated to the United States that the Japanese Navy remained a potent force whose capabilities should not be underestimated. Nimitz wrote that in this engagement the U.S. Navy was “made painfully aware of the Japanese skill…in the use of guns and torpedoes.” He concluded that overcoming such a foe would require “…training, TRAINING and M-O-R-E  T-R-A-I-N-I-N-G.”

**Guadalcanal Secured**

To a certain degree, the naval campaign in the lower Solomons ended the way it began, with the U.S. Navy hesitant to enter the nighttime waters around Guadalcanal after being thrashed in a nocturnal engagement. The Japanese victory at Tassafaronga made even the pugnacious Halsey reluctant to challenge subsequent “Tokyo Expresses” with his remaining warships. Instead, he chose to interdict the Japanese supply runs conducted on the nights of December 3, 7 and 11 with aircraft and PT boats only.

Despite withholding their surface forces from the Guadalcanal area, the Americans nevertheless prevented the Japanese from adequately supplying their garrison. Of the 1,500 supply drums dumped off Guadalcanal on the night of December 3-4, only 310 reached the Japanese soldiers ashore. This was due to the fact that many of the tethered containers separated after hitting the water, allowing American fighters and torpedo boats to sink most of the floating barrels with machine gun fire the next morning.298

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297 Nimitz, CINCPAC Action Report, February 15, 1943, 16.

Although American aircraft and torpedo boats failed to sink any Japanese destroyers on the night of December 7-8, the fierceness of their attacks prevented the foodstuffs from being dumped overboard. On the next supply run four nights later, an American PT boat sank Tanaka’s new flagship, the destroyer *Teruzuki*. This was the first time an American surface-launched torpedo had hit and exploded against a Japanese hull in Savo Sound. (It should be noted that the diminutive PT boats were unable to accommodate the large Mark 15. Hence they carried Mark 13 torpedoes, the same ones used in aircraft. Although exceedingly slow weapons, they were fortunately not equipped with a magnetic exploder.) Although this PT boat success occurred after the enemy had already discharged his supplies, only 220 of the 1,200 drums dropped into the water reached their intended recipients. With bright moonlight returning for the second half of December, the Japanese suspended these destroyer operations for the remainder of the month.

Despite the fact that two of the four destroyer runs had succeeded in offloading supplies, the amount of food that reached Japan’s soldiers on Guadalcanal was far below the minimum requirements. With many of their soldiers suffering from starvation, the Japanese attempted to air-drop supplies into Guadalcanal, but without success. With no other options available, the Japanese again employed their submarines in a transport role. But they could convey only a fraction of the army’s needs.

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299 Ibid., 829.
300 Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 524.
301 Ibid., 527.
302 Stewart, *Guadalcanal*, 149.
Unable to feed the men already on Guadalcanal, the Japanese soon realized the impossibility of recapturing Henderson Field. On December 12 the Imperial Japanese Headquarters ordered the 51st Division to make preparations to deploy to New Guinea rather than Guadalcanal as previously planned. Anticipating the eventual abandonment of Guadalcanal, Admiral Tanaka’s destroyer squadron spent the moonlit second half of December shuttling troops, supplies and equipment to the recently completed air base at Munda, on the island of New Georgia in the central Solomons.

By the end of December, the Japanese high command in Tokyo finally admitted failure and authorized the evacuation of Guadalcanal. During the favorable lunar period in the first half of January, “Tokyo Express” runs resumed while the 8th Fleet staff made preparations for the withdrawal of the troops the following month. Over three nights in the first week of February, twenty destroyers secretly removed nearly 11,000 Japanese soldiers from Guadalcanal. So skillfully did the Japanese execute this operation, the Americans did not discover that their enemy had withdrawn until surprised GIs stumbled into the deserted Japanese camps. The Imperial Japanese Navy had shown itself to be as consummate in retreat as it had been in the attack.

With Japan’s abandonment of Guadalcanal, the United States could officially declare victory after a brutal six month-long struggle. In an assessment of the campaign, Nimitz proudly reported to King that the U.S. Navy had inflicted “disproportionate

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303 Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 536-537.
304 Tanaka, “Japan’s Losing Struggle,” 830.
305 Dull, *Battle History*, 259.
losses” on the enemy. Based on a careful review of the available information, Nimitz determined that U.S. forces had sunk two battleships, one (light) aircraft carrier, four heavy and three light cruisers and at least twenty-four destroyers. He noted that while the United States lost one more carrier and two more heavy cruisers than the enemy, it sank two more battleships, a light cruiser and at least ten more destroyers in compensation. In addition, Nimitz reckoned that the Imperial Navy had suffered roughly twice as much damage as the U.S. Navy. Nimitz, of course, had overestimated his enemy’s casualties. According to the navy’s official historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, the losses sustained by the two sides were virtually even. He concluded volume five of his *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: The Struggle of Guadalcanal* by noting that both adversaries had lost twenty-four combat ships of similar overall tonnage. But Morison’s statistic is somewhat misleading. He includes Japan’s six sunken submarines (half of which were lost making supply runs), yet excludes the six U.S. PT boats destroyed. Removing these craft from consideration reveals a 4-to-3 warship loss ratio. More telling was the manner in which each navy suffered its losses. Japan, for example, lost more ships from air attack than it did in surface combat. When totaling up the losses incurred only from the nighttime engagements, the results are far from equal. Including the scuttled *Kirishima*, the Japanese lost one battleship, one heavy cruiser and five destroyers from surface action. Alternatively, the United States lost six heavy cruisers (including the Australian *Canberra*), one anti-aircraft light cruiser and

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306 Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report on Future Operations in the Solomons Sea Area, December 8, 1942, 2, Record Group 38, Box 259, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

307 Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report on Solomon Islands Campaign, April 17, 1943, 2, Record Group 38, Box 20, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

## Warships Lost in the Guadalcanal Campaign

### Japan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surface Combat</th>
<th>Air Attack</th>
<th>Submarine</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BB  Kirishima</td>
<td>CVL Ryuyo</td>
<td>CA Kako</td>
<td>DDs Teruzuki</td>
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<td>CA  Furutaka</td>
<td>BB Hiei</td>
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<td>Makikumo</td>
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<td>DDs Fubuki</td>
<td>CA Kinugasa</td>
<td>CL Yura</td>
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<td>Dds Mutsuki</td>
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<td>Takanami</td>
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### United States

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<th>Surface Combat</th>
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<th>Submarine</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>CV Hornet</td>
<td>CV Wasp</td>
<td>DD Porter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Astoria</td>
<td>CA Chicago</td>
<td>CL Juneau</td>
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<td>DDs Jarvis</td>
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<td>CL Atlanta</td>
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<td>Dds Blue</td>
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<td>Benham</td>
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CV – Aircraft Carrier  CVL – Light Aircraft Carrier  
BB – Battleship  CA – Heavy Cruiser  
CL – Light Cruiser  DD – Destroyer

* Australian ship

Table 1. Warships Lost in the Guadalcanal Campaign
### Warships Damaged in Surface Combat in the Guadalcanal Campaign

#### Japan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Severely Damaged</th>
<th>Lightly or Moderately Damaged*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BB <em>Hiei</em></td>
<td>CA <em>Chokai</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>CA <em>Aoba</em></td>
<td>DD <em>Ikazuchi</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>DD <em>Amatsukaze</em></td>
<td>DD <em>Murasame</em></td>
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#### United States

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Severely Damaged</th>
<th>Lightly or Moderately Damaged*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BB <em>South Dakota</em></td>
<td>CA <em>Salt Lake City</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAs <em>Chicago</em></td>
<td>CL <em>Helena</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>DDs <em>Patterson</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>Ralph Talbot</td>
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| CLs *Boise*      |                               |
| Juneau           |                               |
| *Aaron Ward*     |                               |
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| *Gwin*           |                               |

| CLs *Boise*      |                               |
| Juneau           |                               |
| *Aaron Ward*     |                               |
| *Sterett*        |                               |
| *Gwin*           |                               |

* Does not include minor or superficial damage

Table 2. Warships Damaged in Surface Combat in the Guadalcanal Campaign
nine destroyers. Thus, the U.S. Navy lost over twice as many ships and 50 per cent more tonnage than its adversary at night. (If the Kirishima is removed from the calculation, the United States lost four times more tonnage.) In addition, the United States suffered severe damage to twelve ships in nighttime combat – one battleship, six heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, one anti-aircraft light cruiser and three destroyers. On the other hand, only three of Japan’s ships – battleship Hiei, heavy cruiser Aoba and destroyer Amatsukaze – incurred similar injuries at night. It should also be noted that five of the U.S. Navy’s twelve ships crippled in Savo Sound took refuge in Tulagi harbor following the battle. Without this sanctuary, it is likely that most or all of them would have been sunk by Japanese aircraft the next morning. Alternatively, if the Japanese had been in possession of Henderson Field and Tulagi, they would likely have saved the battleship Hiei, and possibly the Kirishima. Given these facts, it is clear that the U.S. Navy revealed itself to be far less effective than its opponent in nighttime combat.

The “fog of war” that was especially prevalent in nocturnal warfare obscured the true nature of this situation to the American naval leadership. Nevertheless, despite his belief that the Japanese Navy had suffered heavier losses, Nimitz conceded at the end of 1942 that the United States had not yet achieved superiority in sea power. On the other hand, he credited America’s air and ground forces to be superior to the enemy’s, an assertion undeniably evident by the end of the Guadalcanal campaign. But he reckoned that, at present, the capabilities of the two navies were about equal. The U.S. Navy, he said, possessed an advantage in radar technology and superior anti-aircraft weaponry. But, he admitted that “Our great inferiority is in use and performance of torpedoes.” Although he did not explain what he meant by “performance” nor elaborate on how he
intended to improve the situation, he at least recognized the navy’s primary weakness in nighttime combat. Despite this trouble, he declared that new construction and continued enemy sinkings would probably bring about American naval superiority by the late spring of 1943.\footnote{Nimitz, CINCPAC Report, Solomons Area, December 8, 1942, 2, 4.} Since the next major naval engagement would not take place until the summer of that year following the invasion of the central Solomon Islands, the U.S. Navy would have plenty of time to digest the lessons of the Guadalcanal campaign and implement any necessary changes.
The Navy’s Apparatus for Assessing the Campaign

As it turned out, the Battle of Tassafaronga would be the last significant sea battle in the Solomons until July 1943. And with the Japanese evacuation of Guadalcanal in early February, Halsey’s command experienced a lull in naval activity. Warship bombardments, anti-aircraft actions and escorting missions continued, but the ferocious nighttime engagements that had taken place in Savo Sound ceased. This reprieve gave the U.S. Navy the opportunity to assess its combat performance and institute any necessary changes before the renewal of action. Fortunately for the navy, both King and Nimitz realized that a separate analytical department would be needed for a proper evaluation of the campaign.

At the top of the naval hierarchy stood Admiral King’s COMINCH (Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet) headquarters. When Roosevelt appointed King to this position in December 1941, the latter created three divisions – Plans, Readiness and Operations, each headed by an Assistant Chief of Staff. (In July 1943 King added the Combat Intelligence Division.) As the names imply, the Plans Division drew up the strategic courses of action to be taken, the Readiness Division made sure that the navy was properly manned, equipped and prepared to perform its expected duties and the Operations Division carried out the mission. Of the three, it was the Readiness Division which was responsible for improving the combat effectiveness of the navy. As a staffer from COMINCH headquarters later described it, this division

engaged in continuous checking upon the training and indoctrination of the forces afloat, upon tactics and fundamental techniques of engineering, gunnery and other shipboard activities, and upon the
suitability and usefulness of material furnished the fleet by the technical bureaus.¹

The Readiness Division began its life in January 1942 with the transfer of the Fleet Training Division from the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. (For the first three months of the war King was the Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet only. Not until March 1942 did FDR name him to be the Chief of Naval Operations as well. But even after becoming the CNO, King kept the two commands separate for the duration of the war.) Included in this transfer were a variety of departments that specialized in fields such as gunnery, tactics, engineering and cruising radius, damage control, etc. King’s division split these incoming specialties into one of three sections – Readiness, Training and Indoctrination. The first concerned itself with standardizing the fleet’s general conditions of readiness in preparation for action. The second focused on maintaining the fleet’s proficiency in matters such as gunnery and the navy’s ability to use its weapons effectively. Lastly, the Indoctrination Section kept the fleet’s tactical publications up to date (distributing new versions whenever appropriate) and formulated the navy’s doctrines and procedures.²

As the war progressed, new challenges emerged which demanded more personnel to handle them. Some of these new tasks were incorporated into one of the three existing sections, but others were sufficiently large or unique to require their own section. Over the course of the war King saw fit to add seven new sections to the Readiness Division. Given the havoc German U-boats were causing off America’s East Coast in the first months of the war, the first addition was the Anti-submarine Warfare Section. This was


² Ibid., 119,122, 126.
followed by the Amphibious Warfare, Tactical Analysis, Aviation, Radar, Research and Development and Special Defense (to combat Japanese suicide attacks) sections.

The third addition, the Tactical Analysis Section, was created in order to better understand what had transpired and thus help the navy improve its performance in the future. With the spate of battles taking place around Guadalcanal in the second half of 1942, more and more action reports were pouring into COMINCH headquarters. It soon became apparent that these narratives represented an excellent resource with which to educate officers entering the combat zone for the first time. At the beginning of December 1942 King agreed to the establishment of the Tactical Analysis Section in order to study this information and make it available to qualified officers.

Given the enormity of the material to be reviewed, the section was kept surprisingly small. At most, the section chief had only three WAVE officers and two yeomen assisting him. Yet this small group of staffers painstakingly reviewed all battle reports and war diaries. They then assembled them into a composite narrative of the whole battle, eliminating redundancies or privileged information. When this was completed, King inserted comments, pointing out various mistakes, missed opportunities, violations of doctrine or material failures that required correction. The finished products were assembled into chronological order, bound by month and issued to commanders as secret information bulletins under the title of “Battle Experience.” These bulletins were made available to “assist officers in appreciating the best line of action” in a given situation.³ It was hoped that these tutorials would enable future commanders to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors. The only problem with this program was that it took

³ Ibid., 139.
months for these bulletins to be completed. The bulletin on the Battle of Savo Island appeared in March 1943, with the rest of the Guadalcanal battles analyses in print by April. Although these came too late to benefit those officers sent into action in Savo Sound, the lessons of those encounters were available before the renewal of major naval action in July.

When Nimitz arrived in Pearl Harbor and assumed his post of Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) on December 31, he inherited a staff of just 63 officers (plus enlisted men). Like King, he wanted to keep the number of people in his headquarters small. By the end of July 1942, the number of officers serving with Nimitz had increased only to 79, a figure that remained constant until mid-1943, when the preparations for the Central Pacific offensives in the Gilbert and Marshall Islands demanded additional personnel. Unlike COMINCH headquarters, which was divided into three (later four) divisions, Nimitz had many small sections that all reported directly to him. Initially, the Gunnery Officer had responsibility for the Pacific Fleet’s readiness and training. After being provided with a couple of assistants, the Gunnery Officer was put in charge of what became known as 90 Division (after his original numerical designation). In May 1942 the section was renamed Gunnery and Training to better reflect its raison d’etre. Expanded to five officers that summer, it was Nimitz’s sole resource for insuring the preparedness of the Pacific Fleet as a whole. Yet this small group of officers provided tangible services to Nimitz and the sea forces. One of this section’s more notable achievements was the inception and eventual implementation of

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the Combat Information Center aboard ships. In keeping with its original mission, this section also established a number of schools on the U.S. West Coast, in Oahu and in the South Pacific to train officers and enlisted men in various fields. These included, among others, the Radar School, later expanded to become the Fleet Radar Center and Combat Information Center School in Hawaii.

The 90 Division / Gunnery and Training Division was also responsible for collecting and analyzing the myriad battle reports that began arriving at CINCPAC headquarters in early 1942 with the initiation of the carrier raids on the Japanese-occupied Gilbert and Marshall Islands. These accounts from the fighting forces represented the primary means by which Nimitz was kept informed of what was transpiring in the war zone. However, unaccustomed to this duty, many skippers returning from combat in early 1942 submitted summations of their activities that were lacking in detail and coherence. Dissatisfied with many of these submissions, Nimitz issued a confidential letter to the fleet in June 1942 reminding his commanders of the importance of these compendiums. He wrote that “Accurate and lucid reports are essential in order that we may evaluate what actually happens in the fog of battle, improve tactics, and more efficiently prosecute the war.” To achieve uniformity in reporting, he established a template to which skippers were expected to follow when preparing their reports. Among the prescribed headings were “chronological log of battle,” “special comments on enemy forces,” “special comments on own forces,” and, most importantly, “lessons learned and recommendations.”

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5 Chester Nimitz, Pacific Fleet Confidential Letter 24CL-42, June 21, 1942, 1, Record Group 313, Box 9, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
where officers freely expressed their opinions and suggestions, many of which would be
adopted by the navy.

In addition, to ensure that these reports were both accurate and comprehensive, Nimitz recommended that one or more non-combatant persons be stationed on the bridge to record the various activities that transpired. By adopting this practice, the reports contained a degree of precision that would not have been possible if they had been composed based on the memory of the senior staff alone.

Because of these improvements in reporting at the front, the staff of the 90 Division / Gunnery and Training Division was able to prepare relatively accurate composites of the actions taking place in the South Pacific. These were presented to Nimitz for his comments before being submitted to King. With the commencement of the Solomons campaign, however, the preparation of these CINCPAC reports became an increasingly large burden for such a meager contingent of officers. This was especially true when Nimitz decided in February 1943 to begin issuing a monthly report to King of all activities that transpired in the North, Central and South Pacific theaters. In February, as his staff was completing the last of the reports on the Guadalcanal sea battles, Nimitz asked King for permission to establish a new section dedicated to the preparation of his monthly reports. Given the expanding workload, Nimitz realized that a group of officers devoted to examining the reports of these encounters would be important in helping the navy to better profit from its combat experiences. King, who had recently established his own Tactical Analysis Section, approved Nimitz’s request. In May 1943 Nimitz added the Analytical Section to his headquarters, the first new division he created. Besides studying the naval engagements, this department would make any necessary revisions to
the Pacific Fleet’s tactical publications, investigate any Japanese combat information obtained, and, of course, prepare the voluminous monthly reports to King on the activities that transpired in the Pacific.\(^6\) This allowed the Gunnery and Training Division, which changed its name to the Readiness Division to better mimic the organization at COMINCH headquarters, to concentrate on personnel training and warship maintenance.

Nimitz hoped to staff his new section with senior officers well-versed in naval tactics. Unfortunately, such men were in short supply and were needed elsewhere. Consequently, Nimitz obtained only two regular navy officers for this duty, including Captain R.C. Parker, who was brought out of retirement to run the section. (Parker’s last assignment had been as commander of a few old destroyers, Coast Guard cutters and converted fishing boats patrolling the waters off Alaska in the spring of 1942.) Forced to fill the rest of the department with reservists, Nimitz settled for men with good reading comprehension and exposition skills. As it turned out, the officers who served in this section at one time or another included a pair of lawyers, history professors and history graduate students, as well as one journalist, literary agent and accountant.\(^7\) Despite the growing workload as the war progressed, the section reached a peak of only nine officers in July 1945. It thus fell to these half dozen or so former civilians to transform the myriad battle reports into a single comprehensive narrative from which the navy could derive useful lessons.

Of course, the Analytical Section did not operate behind a “Chinese wall.” After completing a draft of its monthly report, it circulated it among the various sections within

\(^6\) CINCPAC, Command History, 177.

\(^7\) Ibid., 179.
CINCPAC headquarters, including Plans, Intelligence, Operations and Readiness. The more experienced personnel in these departments would add comments or criticisms, giving the report’s originators the opportunity to make any necessary revisions before submitting it to Nimitz for his input and eventual endorsement. Such a widespread review was critical given the increasing importance of these reports. At first, they were intended merely to inform King of the actions taking place in the Pacific. In Nimitz’s preliminary report on the Battle of Savo Island in August, the document was sent to King with only four other recipients provided a copy – the South Pacific Commander and the three task force commanders involved in the battle, i.e. Fletcher, Turner and McCain (in charge of the land-based aircraft in the theater). But it soon became apparent that these overviews were an excellent way to keep officers abreast of the situation, to inform them of the various failings being committed and to provide them with recommendations for improvement. In order to allow as many qualified personnel as possible to benefit from this information, the distribution list of Nimitz’s monthly reports gradually increased, finally peaking at 7,000 addressees. 

In composing these reports, the Analytical staffers operated according to several basic tenets. First, they made every effort to be as accurate as possible. Incorrect information vitiated the very reason for the report in the first place, which was to inform and to serve as a teaching tool. This was an especially important imperative given that the commander in chief’s name was affixed to it. The CINCPAC officers feared that misinformation would tarnish Nimitz’s stature in the eyes of contemporaries and historians alike.

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8 R.C. Parker, History of the Analytical Section, Staff, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, October 8, 1945, 7, Command File, World War II, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
Second, the staffers endeavored to be straightforward in their presentation, yet not accusatory. No unwelcome facts were omitted, but, at the same time, no one’s feelings were spared. The reputations of the various commanders would not be protected, but neither would they be assailed. As Parker wrote, the writers aimed to let “the facts speak for themselves.”\(^9\) Such a course of action was possible because as a retiree, Parker did not have to worry about his future in the navy after the conclusion of his assignment. He could be as candid as necessary, without regard for the consequences on his own career.

Thirdly, the report had to be comprehensive. Parker wrote that he initially considered relying on dispatches as his primary source material. Radio messages and telegrams would enable him to compose a general picture of the encounter, which he said could be enlivened with anecdotes or human interest tales in the journalistic manner. While this would permit his staffers to produce much more timely reports, they would be of little use. Only written action reports contained the necessary detail that would enable the Analytical staff to reconstruct a fairly reliable picture of the engagement. But assembling all of these reports from the distant “fronts” took time. When they were finally collected in Pearl Harbor, the examiners discovered that the reports often conflicted with one another, requiring them to painstakingly reconcile the various discrepancies in order to produce a coherent and sensible whole. This time consuming process also held up the writing of King’s Battle Experience bulletins, which were based on CINCPAC’s reports and the material that comprised them.

Lastly, the staffers realized that the CINCPAC reports had to be kept to a manageable length. An excessively long and detailed document would likely go unread

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\(^9\) Parker, History of Analytical Section, 7.
by its intended recipients. Of course the extent of a given report depended upon the amount of naval activity that transpired during the month. For example, during the last month of the Solomons campaign lull in June 1943, the CINCPAC report totaled only 21 pages. A year later it reached 230 pages when it recounted actions involved in the invasion of the Mariana Islands.\textsuperscript{10} To help keep the length down, air and submarine actions were treated relatively briefly, unlike surface engagements, which were expounded upon in greater detail. Nimitz explained that this more cursory treatment of the former activities did not indicate their lack of importance. Rather, the similarities inherent in these actions meant that broad principles could be derived from a simple overview of these encounters. On the other hand, Nimitz wrote that since the surface battles were fewer in number and more distinctive in character, they warranted closer scrutiny.\textsuperscript{11} In the end, Parker and his staff opted to produce a well-informed and reasonably detailed report that provided useful insights on naval actions 2-3 months old. Although this time lag bothered its authors, there was little they could do to speed up the process without seriously affecting the quality of the finished product. With hindsight, they probably achieved the optimal mix of utility versus timeliness.

In addition to preparing CINCPAC’s monthly report, the Analytical Section also updated the Pacific Fleet’s tactical manuals. Given the inexperience of Parker’s staff in regard to naval tactics, it is not surprising that they did not attempt to formulate new policies on their own. Instead, they relied on input from seasoned officers with combat experience. For example, when Nimitz and his staff decided in early 1944 that a revision

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{11} Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report on Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – June 1943, September 6, 1943, 83, Record Group 334, Box 367, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
of the fleet’s Tactical Orders and Doctrine was called for, the Analytical Section solicited recommendations from the senior commanders afloat and officers of all ranks with familiarity or recent experience in tactical maneuvers. As a result, the revised doctrines reflected the wisdom of officers who had been actively engaged in the war against Japan.

In terms of quality control, the navy also benefited from its dual system of command. For operational purposes, the navy employed a task force system whereby various warships were assembled under a flag officer to undertake a particular mission. Because of the temporary nature of these conglomerations, a second system of command was established for administrative purposes. Regardless of which task force (if any) a ship found itself assigned to on a given day, it always remained under the purview of a particular “type” commander. As the name implies, these commands were organized according to ship types, i.e., battleships, cruisers, destroyers, submarines, amphibious craft, support ships, etc. Each of these classifications was headed by an admiral who managed the day-to-day affairs of these vessels. But the Type Commanders and their small staffs were not limited to administrative concerns alone. On occasion these flag officers advised the commander in chief on tactical matters pertaining to their category of warship. They were also responsible for the publication and upkeep of tactical bulletins that pertained to their class of ship. For example, the Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet, issued manuals to his skippers on the employment of torpedoes. These were policies that had been worked out in peacetime and were intended to guide commanders in action. To keep their bulletins current, Type Commanders were provided with copies

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12 CINCPAC, Command History, 181.
of CINCPAC reports (well before the distribution expanded) and action reports from the ships of their command.

Flag officers operating in the Solomons came under the jurisdiction of Admiral Halsey’s South Pacific command. Since Nimitz delegated tactical control of the forces in the South Pacific to Halsey, the latter established a moderately sized staff to run the war in this theater. He established both a plans and operations division, with the latter containing a combat analysis section. However, Halsey’s review of the actions in the Solomons tended to be brief. Typically, he would forward to Nimitz a few comments, leaving the staff at CINCPAC headquarters the task of dissecting the battles in detail.

The navy derived benefit from one other organization, the U.S. Naval War College, located in Newport, RI. Before the war this institution undertook staff studies, conducted war games and educated senior officers in the art of naval warfare. Vice Admiral William Pye, the Pacific Fleet’s Battle Force commander at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, became the college’s president in early 1942. Pye, well respected for his naval acumen, especially in matters concerning strategy, was a close friend of Admiral King.13 Seeking to tap into this resource, King asked Pye to prepare battle analyses to aid COMINCH headquarters in the preparation of its Battle Experience bulletins. Although Pye’s submissions sometimes came too late to be included in King’s report, Pye and his staff performed this job with distinction, as his cogent examinations of the Solomon’s naval engagements demonstrate.

Revisions in Doctrine

The U.S. Navy expected the outcome of a war with Japan to be settled by a daytime fleet encounter between battle lines. Its doctrines therefore focused on fighting this type of encounter. However, the struggle in the South Pacific entailed a different kind of naval war, one characterized by cruiser-destroyer task forces engaging in nighttime combat in restricted waters. With the exception of the four day clash on November 11-15, battleships were absent from these surface engagements.

Finding itself in an unexpected environment, the U.S. Navy had only its “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” doctrine to guide it. This had first been tested by the Pacific Fleet in September 1941, when Admiral Kimmel had organized an exercise in which a cruiser-destroyer force simulated an attack against a small “enemy” fleet. The results of this trial were promising, with Kimmel generally pleased with the mock destroyer torpedo strike against the heavy ships of the opposing force.14 A couple of weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor acting Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral William Pye issued Tactical Bulletin No. 5-41 – “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack.”

As the name suggests, this document established the navy’s doctrine for cruiser-destroyer task forces seeking to attack the enemy at night. As mentioned, it unfortunately contained certain assumptions that were not necessarily relevant to the situation confronting Halsey’s naval units in the Solomons. Since U.S. Navy dogma stipulated that destroyer torpedoes were to be employed against capital ships, Pye’s bulletin assumed that the objective of an American nighttime task force was the enemy’s battle line (or aircraft carrier group), which would be protected by a screen of cruisers and destroyers. Employing either the “V” or “Wedge” dispositions, the plan called for the

14 Kimmel, Pacific Fleet Confidential Notice 17CN-41, October 22, 1941, 2.
cruisers’ gunfire to destroy or disable a portion of the enemy’s screen to allow the destroyers to approach within torpedo-firing distance of the enemy’s battleships or carriers. In both cases cruisers played the supporting role, their function being to open a pathway for the destroyers to follow through and fire their torpedoes against the enemy’s capital ships.

But this plan was ill-suited to the circumstances in the Solomons. Except during the November 11-15 battle, Japanese forces did not contain battleships or a screen that needed to be pierced. In effect, the vessels that would have comprised the enemy’s screen were the objective. Perhaps because of this, U.S. commanders abandoned the idea of using cruisers to lead the destroyers in a charge against the enemy. Instead they arranged their cruisers into a miniature battle line (stationing the destroyers in their traditional positions to the front and rear of the main body) and sought to cap the enemy’s “T.” In adopting this strategy, U.S. commanders reversed the roles assigned to the cruisers and destroyers, with the latter supporting the former, in contrast to the original plan. Thus, the new goal was to bring the guns to bear rather than the torpedoes.

However, in defense of the American task force commanders, U.S. Navy doctrine held that cruisers were the ideal weapons to employ against enemy light forces, while destroyers were best used against capital ships.15 And since most Japanese naval forces engaged in and around Savo Sound were composed of light forces, the American commanders were adhering to navy canon by focusing on the use of cruiser gunfire to destroy the enemy. But this practice led to the neglect of torpedo fire, which the Japanese demonstrated was the most potent weapon in nighttime encounters in confined waters.

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15 War Instructions, U.S. Navy, 1934, 43, 120; Pye, U.S. Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5-41, December 24, 1941, 2.
On November 14, 1942, Nimitz issued Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5TB-42, which was an update to the prior year’s “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” plan. However, this document was nearly identical to its predecessor, with only a couple of noteworthy changes. For example, to facilitate surprise, the new bulletin stated that gun and torpedo fire should be opened using radar solutions rather than optical devices that required preliminary illumination. In addition, in order to avoid identity problems, all ships were directed to employ their radars to maintain a running plot of enemy and friendly vessels at all times.16

These new policies appeared to reflect some of the lessons learned from the Battle of Cape Esperance. On that October 11-12 night, radar-directed gunfire (supplemented by visual spotting) had been employed to good effect, except for a few incidents of friendly fire against U.S. destroyers. In reality, however, these changes in doctrine had been submitted to Nimitz on August 6, 1942 by Rear Admiral Walden Ainsworth, the Pacific Fleet’s commander of destroyers, two months prior to the Battle of Cape Esperance.17

On November 24, Nimitz saw fit to issue a slight revision to this bulletin which reflected one lesson learned from the Solomons battles. Altering a single paragraph of the November 14 document, he wrote that U.S. commanders should seek to take advantage of land background before engaging the enemy.18 This was most likely in response to the difficulties experienced by Commander Fraser’s destroyers on the night

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16 Nimitz, Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5TB-42, November 14, 1942, 4, 8.

17 W.L. Ainsworth, Revision of U.S. Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5-41, August 6, 1942, 1,4,5,9, Record Group 313, Blue 350, Box 9, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

18 Chester Nimitz, Change to Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5TB-42, November 24, 1942, 1, Record Group 38, Box 168, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
of November 14-15. On that night Japanese destroyers hugging Savo Island’s shoreline were nearly invisible to American radar and spotters. Nimitz’s addendum instructed U.S. officers to make use of this natural camouflage whenever possible. It is unclear whether this directive arrived in the South Pacific prior to the Battle of Tassafaronga, where the backdrop of Guadalcanal caused American gunners similar problems.

Although King wrote in March 1943 that American mistakes committed on the night of the November 12-13 mêlée indicated the need for a thorough study of Tactical Bulletin 5TB-42, the truth was that this doctrine was virtually obsolete on its date of issue. With the Guadalcanal campaign having demonstrated the navy’s many operational defects, a new doctrine was required to rectify this situation.

In response to this need Nimitz issued “Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine, U.S. Pacific Fleet” (PAC-10 for short), on June 10, 1943. Far more encompassing than the tactical bulletins of the past, this document was distributed “to provide, in the light of war experience, instructions both sufficiently inclusive and flexible to control the operations of Pacific Fleet task forces.” Recognizing that wartime conditions had outpaced the navy’s tactical publications, Nimitz wrote that PAC-10 was written in response to this fact and that it was to take precedence in instances where it conflicted with the older doctrines.19

Interestingly, the idea for this new doctrine did not originate with Nimitz. In April 1943 he had established a three-person board of officers at Pearl Harbor to undertake the limited task of revising the Pacific Fleet’s cruising instructions. The trio

consisted of Rear Admiral Robert Griffin (who had recently commanded the Fleet Training Division in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations), Captain Apollo Soucek (a longtime naval aviator) and Captain E. M. Crouch (who had commanded the Asiatic Fleet’s Destroyer Division 57). When these officers began their work they quickly determined that their proposed recommendations would conflict with existing tenets, especially the various tactical bulletins issued in 1942. They therefore decided to exceed their instructions and write an entirely new doctrine. In the month that they spent working on this project the committee members studied the battle reports and war diaries from the Solomons campaign and interviewed as many officers who had participated in these actions as were available. With this information, they reworked the many tactical bulletins and publications then in effect and incorporated them into the finished product.\(^{20}\) The board completed its task in May and submitted its report to Nimitz. Pleased with the new doctrine, Nimitz distributed it to the fleet the following month.

Despite the committee’s somewhat grandiose claim that it conducted a sweeping overhaul of the navy’s precepts, PAC-10 contained few directives that would remedy the mistakes made by U.S. commanders in the South Pacific. Except for reiterating the new readiness status of Condition I – Easy (which kept the men at their battle stations in a relaxed state) and the procedures involved in the establishment of an effective Combat Information Center (discussed below), there was little of worth for U.S. flag officers preparing to engage the Japanese in the central Solomons. Given the ineffectiveness of American destroyer attacks thus far, PAC-10 was notable for its lackluster policies in this area. It recommended that if destroyers detected torpedo targets before the

\(^{20}\) R.F. Good, A. Soucek and E.M. Crouch, Revision of Pacific Fleet Cruising Instructions, May 18, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 22, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
commencement of gunfire, the squadron commander should inform the officer in tactical command and await instructions. If gunfire had already begun, destroyers should fire torpedoes from their stations.21

In terms of tactical deployments, PAC-10 proved especially uninspiring. For “small” task forces it recommended a miniaturized version of the daytime fleet action arrangement, with cruisers and destroyers placed on the engaged bow of a small battleship column. If the commanding officer wished to employ some of his screening forces offensively, PAC-10 suggested that they attack in either the “V” or “Wedge” formation. Most disappointing of all, the authors of this “new” doctrine neglected to rewrite nighttime policies. Instead, they simply attached Tactical Bulletin 5TB-42 to their work as Appendix 6, directing commanders to follow its precepts in the event of nighttime action.22 In recommending this, the authors may simply have been reflecting the conventional wisdom at CINCPAC headquarters, which believed that the employment of the thus far untried “V” or “Wedge” formations would be effective.

Ironically, at the end of April Halsey wrote Nimitz a brief proposal of cruising instruction changes that were far more insightful than anything contained in PAC-10. He suggested three strategies to help achieve surprise in nighttime attacks. First, he recommended slower speeds to reduce ships’ phosphorescent wakes. Second, he suggested that gunfire be withheld until the destroyers’ torpedoes were given a chance to hit the enemy. And lastly, he advised that destroyer skippers should fire torpedoes immediately, without waiting for the approval of the task force commander, assuming the

22 Ibid., Appendix 6, 1.
range and angle to the target are good.\footnote{William Halsey, Proposed Cruising Instructions, April 26, 1943, II-B-2, Record Group 38, Box 90, National Archives II, College Park, MD.} Clearly, Halsey had the Battle of Tassafaronga in mind when he proffered these ideas to Nimitz. Perhaps due to the length of the full document, Nimitz may have simply forwarded Halsey’s report to the board without reading it. And for whatever reason, the board opted not to include these proposals into PAC-10. Consequently, few of the precepts contained in PAC-10 would be of help to U.S. task force commanders operating in the South Pacific.

Although Tactical Bulletin 5TB-42 and PAC-10 failed to establish appropriate battle doctrines for nighttime warfare, Nimitz did issue a new directive that would help the navy derive greater benefits from its radar superiority. Realizing the potential advantages to be accrued by the full exploitation of this technology, CINCPAC headquarters issued Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 4TB-42 on November 26, 1942. Based on the work of Nimitz’s 90 Division / Gunnery and Training Division, this document revamped the fleet’s old radar doctrine dating from December 1941. Its goal was to attain “maximum combat efficiency” through the “establishment in each ship of a center, in which information from all available sources can be received, assimilated, and evaluated with a minimum of delay.”\footnote{Chester Nimitz, Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 4TB-42, November 26, 1942, 1, Command File, World War II, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.} This new organization was called the Combat Operations Center, (later renamed Combat Information Center or CIC). All sources of information (primarily radar, but also that derived from sonar, lookouts, radio operators, navigational instruments, etc.) would be directed to this darkened operations room. From these inputs the Combat Information Center would maintain a radar plot of the tactical
situation, evaluate all the information and disseminate necessary data to various parties, including the captain and gunnery officers. In short, through the creation of a central information clearinghouse, the navy hoped to make its warships more responsive and efficient in their use of combat information. The establishment of Combat Information Centers would begin in earnest in early 1943.

At the “type” command level, Rear Admiral Tisdale (the Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet, since early January 1943), issued Destroyer Tactical Bulletin No. 1-43 on February 20, 1943. Entitled “Destroyer Torpedo Doctrine and Manual of Torpedo Control,” the publication updated the navy’s prewar procedures for destroyer torpedo fire. Along with an exposition on the mechanics of torpedo warfare, the document contained a couple of notable changes from its prewar predecessor. For example, in the determination of suitable torpedo targets, the 1941 manual deferred to the War Instructions, which stated that destroyer torpedoes were to be employed against capital ships only.\(^{25}\) Perhaps with the memory of the encounter of November 14-15 in mind (when Lee’s destroyers withheld their torpedoes against Kimura’s destroyers), the new destroyer doctrine stipulated that any enemy vessel of destroyer-size or larger was a legitimate target. In light past experience and radar’s ability to provide a torpedo solution against an unseen target, Tactical Bulletin 1-43 also stated that the normal speed setting for nighttime conditions was to be reduced from high to intermediate. This increased the range of the Mark 15s from 6,000 yards to approximately 10,000 yards (depending on the type of warhead). The extra reach was needed to allow destroyers the ability to exploit

\[^{25}\text{Commander Destroyers, Battle Force, Type Torpedo Doctrine and Standard Torpedo Control Procedures, Destroyer Tactical Bulletin No. 2-41, July 24, 1941, 1, Record Group 38, Box 172, National Archives II, College Park, MD; War Instructions, United States Navy, 1934, 43.}\]
their radar advantage by firing beyond visual range. Lastly, the new regulations reduced the depth settings to be used. Instead of firing torpedoes below the keels of enemy vessels, destroyermen were to employ a basic depth setting of eight, ten, twelve and twenty-two feet against destroyers, light cruisers, heavy cruisers and battleships, respectively. Alternate torpedoes in the spread were to be four feet deeper than the two or three others using the basic setting. Interestingly, the draft of Japanese warships in each category exceeded the basic depth setting, usually by more than four feet. Thus even the “deep” torpedoes of given spread would hit the enemy hull, assuming they ran true. Although Tactical Bulletin 1-43 still called for the use of the magnetic influence exploder, the stipulated settings indicates that Tisdale was suspicious of this exploder’s reliability and preferred to have his destroyers shoot to hit.26

In short, as the summer of 1943 approached, the navy’s primary doctrinal revisions on tactical employment were twofold – CINCPAC’s November 14, 1942 “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” bulletin and its June 10, 1943 “Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine” (PAC-10). (King’s headquarters in Washington would eventually publish new editions of the navy’s 1934 War Instructions and its 1941 “Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine, U.S. Fleet.” But both of these works would not be completed until 1944, after the end of the Solomon Islands naval campaign.) Thus, as the navy prepared to renew action in the Solomons, its doctrines were still outmoded or lacking in many respects. However, King’s Battle Experience booklets and Nimitz’s battle reports (as well as the individual warship action reports) offered commanders preparing to go into

26 Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet, Destroyer Torpedo Doctrine and Manual of Torpedo Control, Destroyer Tactical Bulletin No. 1-43, February 20, 1943, 3, 11, 14, 15, Record Group 38, Box 130, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
action an excellent examination of the Guadalcanal campaign. They not only documented many of the mistakes committed by American naval forces, but recommended corrective measures for the future. By April 1943 these reports had been completed and were available for review.

Despite some of the obvious lessons contained in CINCPAC’s and COMINCH’s battle evaluations, King and Nimitz refrained from issuing specific instructions to the task force commanders readying for battle. The tradition of empowering flag officers with freedom of action was too strong. King was an especially strong advocate of this practice. In January 1941, while in command of the Atlantic Fleet, King had distributed a memorandum to his officers decrying the increasing tendency of his commanders to issue overly detailed orders to their captains. As King saw it, this violated an essential element of command – the “initiative of the subordinate.” He said that

> If subordinates…are not habituated to think, to judge, to decide and to act for themselves…we shall be in sorry case when the time of ‘active operations’ arrives…Henceforth, we must all see to it that full use is made of the echelons of command…by habitually framing orders and instructions to echelon commanders so as to tell them “what to do” but not “how to do it.”

King maintained this disposition when he became Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet. In his first correspondence with newly-appointed Pacific Fleet commander Nimitz, he wrote that “It is my intention that command shall be exercised by the issuance of general operating plans and/or directives, and that pertinent discretion and responsibility shall be vested in the appropriate principle subordinates in the chain of command.”

King practiced what he preached. When he told Nimitz in December that his primary

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27 Ernest King, CINCLANT Serial 053, January 21, 1941, 8-9, from COMINCH Headquarters, U.S. Naval Administration in World War II, 1946.

28 CINCPAC, Command History, 73.
task was to defend the Hawaii-Midway archipelago and the sea communications to
Australia, he left it up to Nimitz to decide how best to accomplish this. Likewise, Nimitz
later delegated operational command of the South Pacific forces to Halsey, who in turn
typically ordered his task force commanders to simply intercept and destroy the enemy.
This philosophy ensured that flag officers preparing to go to battle in the central
Solomons would be granted the freedom to direct their naval forces as they saw fit. King,
Nimitz and Halsey trusted that they would act judiciously and in accord with established
doctrine. The only problem with this arrangement was that while the Battle Experience
and CINCPAC battle reports were excellent guides, the doctrines were not. It would be
the responsibility of the task force commanders to make more use of the former rather
than the latter.
CHAPTER FOUR
TACTICAL DEFEATS IN THE CENTRAL SOLOMONS

Having finally secured Guadalcanal in February 1943, Halsey looked forward to a resumption of the offensive drive toward the Japanese citadel of Rabaul. Although no official orders had been issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Halsey suspected that his next major objective would be the Japanese airstrip at Munda, on the island of New Georgia in the central Solomon Islands. The Japanese had completed this runway in late December 1942, enabling Japanese planes to reach Guadalcanal after a flight of only 180 miles rather than the original 565 miles from Rabaul. In January 1943 the Japanese completed a second runway at Vila on the island of Kolombangara, about 10 miles north of the Munda field. With the construction of these two air bases, Japanese aircraft attacking Guadalcanal could stage through Vila or Munda to refuel, then return to the fields at Rabaul or Buin (on the island of Bougainville in the northern Solomons), safely beyond the range of American single-engined aircraft.

Two weeks after the Japanese evacuated Guadalcanal, Halsey’s forces made their first tentative step up the Solomons chain with an unopposed invasion of the Russell Islands, approximately 30 miles north of Guadalcanal. But the establishment of an airfield and PT boat base here served more as a sentinel for Guadalcanal rather than a means to conduct offensive operations against the enemy.

Lacking the resources to assail Munda for the time being, Halsey nevertheless fielded an impressive array of naval power. Admiral Lee commanded a fast battleship force composed of his flagship Washington and three other recently commissioned battle wagons. Another force comprised a pair of old battleships and three escort carriers. Two
Map 7. The Central Solomons

aircraft carrier task forces built around the *Enterprise* and *Saratoga* provided Halsey with some mobile air power. Lastly, Halsey possessed two cruiser-destroyer task groups, both containing four light cruisers and eight destroyers. With these forces Halsey sent out the word that he intended to “keep pushing the Japs around.”1

As events would demonstrate, only the two cruiser-destroyer task forces would see action of any consequence in the South Pacific in 1943. When the new year began, it was Task Force 67 that went to battle first. This, of course, was the same naval unit that had been devastated at the Battle of Tassafaronga. With the heavy cruisers sunk or laid up, the formation was rebuilt around the four light cruisers of Cruiser Division 9. The unit also had a new commander. Although Nimitz had widely praised Wright’s actions during the Tassafaronga encounter and (along with King and Halsey) had permitted him to be awarded the Navy Cross for his role in the engagement, Halsey was not convinced that Wright’s conduct was especially meritorious. He wrote Nimitz that although he saw no blatant errors on Wright’s part from the action reports, he had an “intuitive feeling” that the battle was not well handled. Moreover, Halsey believed that Wright, like all commanders who had suffered heavy losses in combat, was “pretty well ‘shot’ after such an experience.”2 He therefore sent Wright to Washington to recuperate. Nimitz gave his blessing to this action, reassuring Halsey that “We are out to win a war and not please individuals. Those not in line for the first team must be sent ashore.”3

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As luck would have it, Rear Admiral Walden “Pug” Ainsworth, the Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet, was visiting the South Pacific in December and Halsey snatched him up as the provisional commander of Task Force 67. Ainsworth’s “temporary” assignment ended up lasting for the duration of the Solomons campaign.

Even before the conclusion of the Guadalcanal campaign, Halsey sent Ainsworth north to begin “pushing around” the enemy. On the night of January 4-5, 1943, a portion of Task Force 67 conducted a bombardment of the Munda airfield. On the night of January 23-24 Ainsworth took his task force north and bombarded the airfield at Vila. Although the Japanese repaired the potholed runways within a day, these actions gave Halsey’s naval units practice in the art of nighttime operations in enemy waters. Moreover, these forays and frequent exercises enabled the task force to become a well-practiced team, creating a degree of familiarity among the warships that had been absent during the Guadalcanal campaign.

Halsey’s second cruiser-destroyer unit was Task Force 68, commanded by Rear Admiral Aaron Stanton Merrill. Having commanded a destroyer squadron during the last years of peace, Merrill had most recently captained the new battleship Indiana before being promoted to flag rank and assigned to lead Cruiser Division 12, which comprised the four new Cleveland-class light cruisers that made up the core of Task Force 68. He assumed his new assignment in late January and immediately began drilling his unit between sunset and sunrise – the period in which Merrill expected to meet his enemy at sea. After spending most of February engaged in nighttime exercises, Merrill’s task force was ordered by Halsey to bombard the Japanese airfield at Vila on the night of March 5-6. Unlike Ainsworth’s earlier forays, this one would encounter two enemy vessels.
A Small Success in Kula Gulf

In an attempt to render the Japanese installations at Munda and Vila unusable, Halsey ordered Merrill to bombard both bases on the night of March 5-6, 1943. Merrill would lead his three available light cruisers and three destroyers into Kula Gulf (the body of water enclosed by Kolombangara Island to the west, Arundel Island to the south and New Georgia Island to the east) and shell Vila while four of his destroyers bombarded Munda. Steaming up the “Slot” as night fell on March 5, Merrill ordered readiness Condition I – Easy set, sending the crews to General Quarters. While at their battle stations, the crews remained at ease, were served food and allowed bathroom breaks.

During this time a message was received from Guadalcanal stating that an aerial scout had sighted two light cruisers or destroyers leaving the Shortlands base and heading south at high speed. Merrill and his officers calculated that these enemy ships could reach Kula Gulf about the same time as they did and were perhaps dispatched in order to intercept his force.

Around midnight Merrill ordered the readiness status upgraded to Condition I. A few minutes later Task Force 68 rounded the northern tip of New Georgia Island and proceeded southwesterly into Kula Gulf. Destroyer Waller, 6,000 in front of the main body, scouted ahead to make sure no enemies lurked in the gulf. Destroyer Conway came next, followed by the three light cruisers – Montpelier (flagship), Cleveland and Denver – with the trailing Cony positioned off the Denver’s port quarter to tackle any enemy motor torpedo boats that might emerge from the coves of New Georgia.

With no moon overhead and poor visibility, Merrill was compelled to periodically employ his SG radar for navigational purposes. Although it was well-suited for this task,
Admiral Merrill’s Bombardment of Vila
March 5-6, 1943

Map 8. Admiral Merrill’s Bombardment of Vila
the electronic eye could not simultaneously guide the ship and search for the enemy. Fortunately for Task Force 68, the two Japanese destroyers retiring northward from Vila along the Kolombangara coast did not escape its notice.

Seeking to get a fix on Sasamboki Island (a small piece of land just off the coast of Vila), the Montpelier’s radar center reported the island to be bearing 234 degrees, distance 14,300 yards. The navigator, however, informed the radar operator that the island’s bearing was good, but the range was about 9,000 yards short. On closer inspection the radarman reported that the “island” was moving northwards and that it had split into two pieces. At 0101 (four minutes after first contact) Merrill radioed his task force that two enemy ships were off the starboard bow and ordered his skippers to “Stand by to commence firing.”

To help his ships elude enemy torpedoes, Merrill increased his force’s speed from 20 to 25 knots. One minute later, lead ship Waller, which had been tracking the suspicious contact for about five minutes, fired a spread of five torpedoes. After another minute, Merrill radioed “Execute Dog.” (“Dog” had replaced the confusing term “roger” as the signal to commence firing).

The Montpelier opened fire immediately at 10,000 yards range, followed seconds later by the Cleveland, Denver and Waller. Unable to see their target, the American gunners employed radar solutions to zero in on their foe. And as tended to happen with such fire, all the gunners concentrated on the largest “pip” – lead destroyer Murasame. The crews aboard this ship and its trailing companion Minegumo had no idea the Americans were in Kula Gulf. Up against the coast of New Georgia, Task Force 68 was as invisible to Japanese eyes as the Japanese were to the Americans. Their only warning

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4 Aaron Merrill, Task Force 68 Action Report, March 9, 1943, 7, Record Group 38, Box 29, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
of the Americans’ presence was the sight of twinkling lights in the distance, which the Japanese lookouts instantly recognized as enemy gun flashes.\(^5\) Sixteen seconds later the Montpelier’s thirty-six six-inch shells rained down around the Murasame, with another seventy-two arriving shortly thereafter.\(^6\)

With all ships concentrating on the Murasame, the hapless destroyer found itself engulfed in flames in a matter of minutes. One of Waller’s torpedoes struck (and detonated against) the ship, setting off an explosion that was heard by the U.S. destroyermen preparing to bombard Munda twenty-five miles away.\(^7\) (This was the first American destroyer-fired torpedo to score in the Solomons campaign.) As the Murasame sank, American radar operators saw its “pip” vanish from their scopes.\(^8\)

With the destruction of the Murasame, Merrill’s gunners checked their fire and redirected their guns against the Minegumo at 0108. The five minute grace period was evidently not long enough for the crews of this ship to initiate a torpedo strike. Although the Minegumo did reply with its guns, its fire was inaccurate.

Passing the Murasame to the east, the Minegumo helpfully silhouetted itself to Merrill’s gunners, who showered this remaining ship with six-inch and five-inch shells. Within minutes this destroyer was ablaze and dead in the water. Its victim finished, Task Force 68 ceased firing at 0114. Six minutes later flagship Montpelier changed course to

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\(^7\) Merrill, Task Force 68 Action Report, March 9, 1943, 8.

\(^8\) E.W. Burrough, *USS Cleveland* Action Report, March 9, 1943, 4-5, Record Group 38, Box 29, National Archives II, College Park, MD; H.F. Pullen, Task Unit 68.1.3 Action Report, March 7, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 29, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
due north and calmly commenced its bombardment of Vila as scheduled. After a sixteen-minute pounding of the Japanese base, the task force retired out of the gulf and back down the “Slot.”

**Assessment of the battle**

King and Nimitz were both pleased with Merrill’s performance in Kula Gulf. After all, the new admiral had taken a green force into enemy waters, dispatched a pair of enemy destroyers, then completed his bombardment mission without incurring any damage. Nimitz wrote that “the operation had all the precision of a well rehearsed exercise by veteran ships, which these were not.” He was also justly proud of the new Combat Information Centers, which had been established in Merrill’s ships according to his November 26 Tactical Bulletin 4TB-42. In his report, Nimitz reprinted the Cleveland’s Captain Edmund Burrough’s statement that the CIC “functioned efficiently during the critical detection and initial tracking phases and dovetailed effectively with the main and AA battery control groups.”

Nimitz’s only criticism was the erratic function of some of the radars disabled from the shock caused by the firing of the main batteries. The Commander in Chief instructed his forces to be sure to fire all guns simultaneously during practices in order to determine if any radar antennae were improperly mounted.

King also had only one criticism of Task Force 68 – its poor fire distribution. Merrill and his captains admitted in their reports that all their fire had been concentrated against one ship at a time. The former speculated that this was probably due to the fact

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9 Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report on Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – March 1943, June 9, 1943, 28, Record Group 334, Box 367, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

10 Ernest King, Battle Experience, Solomon Islands and Alaskan Areas, March 1943, June 15, 1943, Chapter 41, 9, Record Group 334, Box 443, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
that the closer ship presented a larger “pip” on the radar screens, prompting all gunners to focus on it.

This problem had been a major factor in Wright’s defeat at the Battle of Tassafaronga. In that engagement American gunners had initially left seven of their enemy unmolested, allowing Japanese torpedomen to launch a devastating counterblow. Fortunately for Merrill, this had not reoccurred. He correctly reasoned that his attack had been so sudden and unexpected that his opponent had not had time to react.

Of course, Merrill was aided by the fact that he had completely surprised his enemy. Unlike Tanaka’s lookouts on the night of November 30-December 1, those on the Murasame and Minegumo were unaware of their enemy until they saw the American gun flashes. This circumstance was more fortuitous than planned. Merrill explained that he had led his task force along the coast of New Georgia (where coral reefs generated whitecaps) in order to hide his wakes from aerial observation. Only in retrospect did he realize that the dark rise of the island had helped shield his ships’ silhouettes from observation.11 Strangely, King praised Merrill for hugging the New Georgia coast as an effective means to conceal his vessels from airborne snoopers, yet made no mention of the fact that it probably hid him from shipboard lookouts too, which was more important.

Although pleased with the outcome of this encounter, Merrill recognized the need for two material improvements. First, he recommended that flashless powder be issued to the fleet. He was less concerned that the present propellant gave away his position than that it blinded his personnel, making them vulnerable to attacks by unseen enemy vessels, especially small craft. Secondly, Merrill recommended that a second SG radar

set be provided to each ship. Operating task forces on dark nights in confined waters required that the SG radar be used for navigation. But this device was also needed to sweep the area for enemy vessels and, if any were found, to determine their bearing, course and speed to enable the fire control radars to lock on to the target. The SG radar was also needed to keep the task force commander informed of the general tactical situation, including the whereabouts of this own ships. Since the SG radar could only perform one of these duties at a time, Merrill believed that ships should be equipped with at least one additional set. Otherwise, an American task force navigating by radar might be surprised by an undetected enemy. King and Nimitz agreed with this wise advice, and wrote that every effort would be made to implement this.

Although this engagement in Kula Gulf was a relatively minor clash, it was nevertheless heartening to the navy, which had suffered extensive damage at Tassafaronga and had recently lost the heavy cruiser Chicago to Japanese torpedo bombers at the end of January. However, this victory helped perpetuate some unhealthy notions. It reinforced the American conviction that the gun was the primary weapon at night and that it was highly accurate. In his report, Merrill praised the new fire control radar, which he said was so sophisticated that it provided excellent spotting of shells in both range and deflection, even when used to target an enemy against a land background.\(^{12}\) The post-battle reports also contained numerous testimonials to the disappearance of the first target’s “pip” after the ship sank. This lent more credence to the idea that a vanishing “pip” necessarily meant a sinking ship, which was often not the case.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 11.
Like the victory at Cape Esperance, this engagement also served to downplay the enemy’s torpedo threat. Merrill had apparently demonstrated that by hitting hard and fast, the enemy would not have the opportunity to launch a torpedo attack. This had worked in this battle against a surprised enemy consisting of only two ships. But it might not be so effective against a more alert and numerous opponent.

The Invasion of the central Solomons

On March 15, 1943 Admiral King instituted a more logical numbering system for the U.S. Navy. All fleets in the Atlantic would be assigned an even number while those in the Pacific would be given an odd number. Thus, the naval units under MacArthur in the Southwest Pacific became the 7th Fleet. The ships forming in Pearl Harbor for the eventual drive across the central Pacific became the 5th Fleet. And Halsey’s South Pacific ships became the 3rd Fleet. Accordingly, Turner’s amphibious craft became Task Force 31 and Fitch’s South Pacific air force became Task Force 33. Oddly, Ainsworth’s and Merrill’s commands became Task Forces 18 and 19, respectively. Not until the late summer of 1943 did they assume the more logical designations of Task Forces 38 and 39.

At the end of March the Joint Chiefs of Staff finally gave MacArthur and Halsey their marching orders. The former would invade the islands of Kiriwina and Woodlark, which lay north of New Guinea in the Coral Sea. Halsey’s objective, not surprisingly, was Japan’s airfield at Munda on New Georgia Island in the central Solomon Islands. Since a direct assault against Munda was judged to be too risky, a series of points on and around New Georgia would be seized to support the offensive to capture the air base. These acquisitions would provide anchorages and airfields for temporary use by small craft and planes. The two primary invasion sites would be Rendova Island (five miles
from Munda airfield) and Zanana beach on New Georgia, five miles east of Munda. To confuse the Japanese, MacArthur’s and Halsey’s invasions would be launched simultaneously, on June 30, 1943.

In the weeks and months leading up to D-Day, Ainsworth’s and Merrill’s task forces kept busy. Although their destroyers were often employed in various escort duties, the two cruiser divisions were mostly kept together, allowing both commanders to hone them into cohesive units. When these forces were not undergoing sea exercises, Halsey sent them up the “Slot” to conduct shore bombardments or naval sweeps.

When Halsey’s invasion of the central Solomons began on the last day of June, the Japanese were caught unprepared. The unrelenting U.S. air strikes against Vila and Munda airfields had prompted the Japanese to remove their aircraft from these forward bases. And since the Japanese did not expect Halsey to move when he did, they had only one cruiser and eight destroyers at Rabaul on June 30.13 As a result, the U.S. invasions in the central Solomons initially faced little aerial or naval opposition. A few air raids and an ineffective bombardment of Rendova on the night of July 2-3 did little to prevent the Americans from solidifying their beachheads.

At the end of 1942 the Japanese had reorganized their command structure and put Vice Admiral Jinichi Kusaka in charge of all naval forces in the Bismarcks-New Guinea-Solomons region. With the title of Commander Southeast Area Fleet, Kusaka controlled both the 8th Fleet (now commanded by Vice Admiral Tomoshige Samejima) and 11th Air Fleet, as well as the all Navy troops in the area, from his headquarters at Rabaul. His counterpart in the army was Lieutenant General Hitoshi Imamura, who commanded the

13 Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, 143.
8th Area Army, also from Rabaul. To better defend the southern approaches to Rabaul, Imamura and Kusaka agreed that the army would assume responsibility for stopping MacArthur in New Guinea while the navy did the same against Halsey’s forces in the Solomons. Thus, it was up to Kusaka to deal with Halsey’s thrust into New Georgia on June 30. Reluctantly, Imamura put 4,000 soldiers at Kusaka’s disposal to prevent the enemy from capturing Munda. On July 4 Kusaka ordered four destroyers under the command of Rear Admiral Teruo Akiyama to carry the first contingent of these men to Vila, where they would be ferried across Kula Gulf and thence marched through a jungle trail to Munda on the south side of New Georgia.

Aware that Japan was using Vila as a staging point for reinforcements to Munda, Halsey ordered a 2,600-strong contingent of Marine and army troops under Colonel Harry Liversedge, USMC, to land at Rice Anchorage on the north side of New Georgia. Their mission was to choke off the Vila-Munda supply route by marching southwestwards along the coast and capture Bairoko Harbor, the terminus of the trans-New Georgia trail. On July 4 Liversedge’s men were embarked onto seven destroyer-transports and shepherded to their destination by five destroyers. To distract the enemy, Halsey ordered Ainsworth to take his three available light cruisers and four destroyers into Kula Gulf and bombard Vila and Bairoko Harbor just prior to the landing of Liversedge’s men.

On the night of July 4-5, Ainsworth led his column of three light cruisers and two trailing destroyers into the Gulf. He sent destroyers Strong and Nicholas ahead to scout for any surface or subsurface enemies. With no contacts found, Ainsworth proceeded towards the Kolombangara coast and commenced his nine-minute bombardment. This
barrage was distinguished by the fact that it was conducted using the navy’s new flashless powder. Although it produced a burst of light greater than Japan’s propellant, it was significantly dimmer than the blaze generated by the navy’s smokeless powder.

Following the attack on Vila, the Nicholas and Strong led the formation eastward, whence all seven ships opened fire on Bairoko Harbor on the other side of the gulf. Upon completion of their bombardment, the Nicholas and Strong turned northwards and proceeded up the New Georgia coast, with the rest of the force following from a distance. At 0049, six minutes after its turn to the north, a torpedo crashed into the Strong’s port side, sending it to the bottom thirty-five minutes later.\(^\text{14}\) Where had it come from?

At the mouth of Kula Gulf Liversedge’s transport group had been heading south along the New Georgia coast. Around 0030 the radar scope on the Ralph Talbot (one of the five destroyers escorting the seven transports) registered an unidentified “pip” to the west. By 0040 the contact appeared to be a couple of ships exiting the gulf on a northwesterly heading. Just as the Ralph Talbot was communicating this information to Ainsworth in the foot of the gulf, the Strong was hit.

Although the Americans could not believe it, one of the destroyers detected by the Ralph Talbot had fired the torpedo that sank the Strong. Because Akiyama’s flagship carried a proto-type radar set, he had discovered Ainsworth’s column as it steamed across the gulf toward Vila. Unwilling to fight his way past the Americans, Akiyama cancelled his transport mission and turned for home. But as he wheeled his ships around at 0015, he ordered spreads of torpedoes fired at the enemy. In an attack unprecedented for its range, his torpedoes traveled eleven miles before one struck the Strong thirty-four

\(^{14}\) O’Hara, U.S. Navy Against the Axis, 172.
minutes later.\textsuperscript{15} So incredible was this strike that Ainsworth concluded that his unseen assailant had been a submarine, a deduction that Nimitz shared.\textsuperscript{16} Although the task group’s destroyer squadron commander, Captain Francis McInerney, suggested that the enemy torpedo may have originated from an enemy destroyer detected by the transport group at the head of the gulf, Ainsworth vehemently denied such a possibility. He argued that his cruisers’ radars would have detected any surface foe that approached within torpedo range. (It is unclear why Ainsworth’s scopes did not discover Akiyama’s ships when they fired their torpedoes.) Thus, by refusing to consider the possibility that McInerney might be right, Ainsworth missed the chance to grasp the encounter’s most important lesson – that his enemy’s destroyer-fired torpedoes had a very long reach.

\textbf{The Battles of Kula Gulf and Kolombangara}

As Ainsworth’s three cruisers and destroyers \textit{Nicholas} and \textit{O’Bannon} proceeded south of Guadalcanal to rendezvous with an oil tanker on the afternoon of July 5, a message arrived from South Pacific Headquarters at 1500. With intelligence sources indicating that a “Tokyo Express” was headed to Vila that night, Halsey instructed Ainsworth to forgo the scheduled refueling, reverse course and speed up the “Slot” to intercept the enemy. To replace the sunken \textit{Strong} and damaged \textit{Chevalier} (it had collided with the former as it approached to take off its crew), Halsey ordered the destroyers \textit{Radford} and \textit{Jenkins} (which were currently replenishing in Tulagi Harbor) to join Ainsworth en route to Kula Gulf.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 172-173.

\textsuperscript{16} Walden Ainsworth, Task Group 36.1 Action Report, July 30, 1943, 2, Record Group 38, Box 139, National Archives II, College Park, MD; Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC Report on Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – July 1943, October 21, 1943, 105, Record Group 334, Box 367, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
Ainsworth steamed up the “Slot” that evening with a certain degree of excitement. He had been traveling up and down this route for six months and had yet to encounter a surface enemy. (Or so he thought, since he believed that the Strong had been torpedoed by a Japanese submarine.) He had conducted numerous bombardments and had drilled his vessels in nighttime exercises at every opportunity. And unlike the addition of the Lamson and Lardner to Wright’s task group at the Battle of Tassafaronga, the just-joined Radford and Jenkins were members of his eight-ship destroyer squadron. Thus, all the skippers were familiar with his practices and knew what their commander expected of them.

Although there had been no opportunity for a pre-battle conference, Ainsworth had previously issued a battle plan that was to be followed in the event of action. Despite the fact that Ainsworth had spent the second half of 1942 as the Pacific Fleet’s commander of destroyers, he was a devotee of the naval rifle. Regarding the gun as the primary weapon, his plan was to surprise the enemy with a hail of cruiser gunfire at 8,000 – 10,000 yards range in full radar control (the maximum range that the fire control radars could spot shells) (Plan A) or to open battle up to a distance of 13,000 yards with the aid of star shell illumination (Plan B). (Ainsworth assumed that 13,000 yards was near the maximum range of the enemy’s torpedoes when set on their slowest speed setting.) After the cruisers opened fire, destroyers would fire torpedoes at targets of opportunity, largely to deliver the coup de grace to the crippled enemy. His plan contained two primary

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17 Walden Ainsworth, Task Force 18 Operation Plan No. 4-43, March 16, 1943, Annex B, 3, Record Group 38, Box 261, National Archives II, College Park, MD; Walden Ainsworth, Task Group 36.1 Action Report – Additional data on, March 15, 1944, 10, Record Group 38, Box 140, National Archives II, College Park, MD; Francis McInerney, Destroyer Squadron 21 Action Report, July 20, 1943, 9, Record Group 38, Box 139, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
assumptions – that the U.S. Navy enjoyed far superior search and fire control radar
technology (which the aforementioned plan sought to exploit) and that the enemy’s
cruisers carried torpedoes, “a menace which should not be accepted unnecessarily.”
In addition, Ainsworth’s plan stated that the principles contained in CINCPAC’s Tactical
Bulletin 5TB-42 (“Light Forces in Night Search and Attack”) would be observed.

Ainsworth steamed northward eager to put his plan to the test. Around midnight
on July 5-6 the American crews went to General Quarters. About an hour later the U.S.
formation approached the mouth of Kula Gulf. With nighttime Japanese air attacks
becoming more frequent, the formation maintained its anti-aircraft disposition, with two
destroyers off the cruiser column’s bow and two others off its quarter.

Already in the gulf and heading south along the Kolombangara coast toward Vila
was the “Tokyo Express” under Admiral Akiyama. Returning for a second consecutive
night, Akiyama led three groups of destroyers this time, two of which were loaded with
troops and supplies. Captain Tsuneo Orita led the First Transport Unit with three
destroyers. Captain Katsumori Yamashiro led the Second Transport Unit consisting of
destroyers Amagiri (flagship), Hatsuyuki, Nagatsuki and Satsuki. Protecting these loaded
ships were Akiyama’s Support Unit, comprising destroyers Niizuki (flagship), Suzukaze
and Tanikaze.

With no sign of the enemy, Akiyama detached Orita’s trio at 0026, sending them
ahead to unload their men and cargo at Vila. Meanwhile, Akiyama lingered to the north,
keeping an eye out for American vessels. Around 0106 his flagship’s new radar picked
up a contact to the rear, prompting Akiyama to reverse course to the north to investigate.
Since Ainsworth’s group was still many miles away, the Niizuki’s “pip” was almost

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certainly a false echo. Nevertheless, Akiyama continued northward, vigilantly searching the darkness. But after nearly forty minutes without sighting his enemy, Akiyama finally decided to detach the second transport unit. Yamashiro thus led his unit in a 180 degree turn to port.

Only minutes before Yamashiro swung his quartet out of the line toward Vila, the SG radar on Ainsworth’s flagship discovered Akiyama’s formation along the Kolombangara coast at a distance of nearly nine miles. Ainsworth immediately radioed his vessels to assume battle formation and prepare for action according to Battle Plan A – gun battle at 8,000-10,000 yards in full radar control with no illumination. Before the destroyers could fully swing into column with the light cruisers, Ainsworth ordered his task group to turn toward the enemy to close the range. He then ordered another simultaneous turn to the right, putting his vessels back in column on their original west-northwest heading. The U.S. column was led by destroyer Nicholas, followed by destroyer O’Bannon, light cruisers Honolulu (flagship), Helena and St. Louis, with the destroyers Jenkins and Radford astern. As Ainsworth’s ships steamed across the head of the Japanese column (thereby crossing the “T”), he ordered a normal fire distribution scheme (each ship firing at its opposite number in the enemy line).

By 0151 Ainsworth’s radar scope informed him that there were two Japanese formations, one in the front, followed by what appeared to be heavier ships in the rear. He radioed for his van destroyers to target the closer unit, while his cruisers and rear destroyers tackled the bigger ships in the back. Destroyer squadron leader Captain Francis McInerney in the lead-ship Nicholas asked Ainsworth if he wanted his destroyers to open with gunfire or torpedoes. Wanting the torpedoes saved for use against the
The Battle of Kula Gulf
July 5-6, 1943

Kolombangara Is.

2nd Transp. Unit

Nitruki (Adm. Akiyama)
Suzakaze
Tanikaze

Nitruki

Adm. Ainsworth

Map 9. The Battle of Kula Gulf
“cruisers” in the rear, Ainsworth replied “Gun fire first, but hold everything.”19 His radar scope now indicated that the two enemy formations were separating and that the heavier unit in the rear was moving away. Ainsworth therefore ordered all his ships to concentrate on the closer enemy. He radioed that once the nearer contingent was dispatched, the task group would countermarch and strike the second group on the reverse leg.

The change in plan delayed the opening of gunfire as the cruisers’ gun directors struggled to reacquire targets in the closer group. Once this was accomplished, Ainsworth gave the order to open fire at 0157. By now, the range had dropped to less than 7,000 yards.

As had happened at the Battle of Tassafaronga, all of the U.S. cruisers fired on a single target – lead-ship Niizuki. Under the normal distribution fire scheme that Ainsworth had ordered, only flagship Honolulu should have fired on the Niizuki. But the other two cruisers had difficulty distinguishing their assigned targets behind the leader, prompting them to simply shoot at the biggest “pip.” The forty-five rapid-firing six-inch American rifles pulverized Akiyama’s flagship, disabling it in the opening minute, leaving it aflame and foundering.

The U.S. destroyers, however, contributed little in this phase. Despite the fact that Ainsworth had ordered the destroyers to open with gunfire, all four skippers kept their guns quiet in order to set up a torpedo attack. However, crossing an opponent’s bow did not present a favorable torpedo angle. Moreover, because Ainsworth had waited so long to deploy his force into battle formation, the destroyers had not fully reached their

19 Walden Ainsworth, Commander Task Group 36.1 Action Report, August 1, 1943, TBS Log, unpaged, Record Group 38, Box 139, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
assigned stations in the column. When the order came to commence firing, the van
destroyers found themselves slightly off the Honolulu’s starboard bow, leaving them
unable to fire torpedoes with the flagship dangerously close to the line of fire. In the rear
of the column, the hurried redeployment found the Jenkins off the port beam of the
Radford, blocking the latter’s line of fire completely. Consequently, only the Jenkins
managed to fire a spread of torpedoes at the enemy. But it did so too late, resulting in a
long-range chase of a retreating enemy.

Although Ainsworth believed that his enemy had been taken by surprise, the truth
was that Japanese lookouts had spied shadows on the horizon ten minutes before the
American column opened fire.20 Once the spotters confirmed the sighting, Akiyama
recalled Yamashiro’s loaded destroyers and ordered them to rejoin his formation. In the
meantime, Akiyama’s three destroyers prepared for a torpedo strike. Just before
Ainsworth guns opened fire, the Niizuki bore left to better unmask its tubes. But before
the torpedoes could be fired, falling American shells crippled the flagship. However, the
trailing Suzukaze and Tanikaze enjoyed a two or three minute grace period in which to
line up a torpedo attack, using the American gun flashes as a point of aim. (Although
dimmer than before, the U.S. gun flashes still provided enough light to allow Japanese
torpedomen to get a fix on their enemy.) Within a minute the Suzukaze and Tanikaze put
sixteen “Long Lances” into the water. They raced toward the American column at 49
knots, 15 knots faster than the Mark 15 torpedo could travel at that range. When
American gunners moved off the Niizuki and began to target the Suzukaze and Tanikaze,
both destroyers made smoke and retreated at high speed to the northwest. Only a few

American shells (a couple of them duds) found their mark before the pair cleared the area.

After six minutes of firing Ainsworth’s radar scope indicated that all contacts were “dead in the water.” With his forward guns straining to bear on the enemy off the port quarter and convinced that the nearer group had been “practically obliterated,” Ainsworth ordered a 180 degree simultaneous turn to starboard at 0203.21 But just as the *Helena* was about to make its turn, a Japanese torpedo slammed into its port side, tearing off the ship’s bow as far back as the second gun turret. Two more torpedoes struck the light cruiser amidships about a minute apart. These two caused the remaining portion of the ship to jackknife, with the forward and aft sections riding high as the center slowly submerged. The other two cruisers were more fortunate. A “Long Lance” narrowly missed the *Honolulu* as it began its turn while another hit the *St. Louis* just after it completed its turn, but the warhead failed to explode.

As the U.S. ships swung around on an east-southeast heading in reverse order, no one was aware that the *Helena* was no longer with them. Ainsworth ordered the formation to turn to the southeast to close the range, whereupon the destroyers *O’Bannon* and *Radford* elected to fire a spread of torpedoes against the retreating *Suzukaze* and *Tanikaze* to the westward. Not surprisingly, these “fish” failed to catch their quarry.

With the range to the new enemy down to about 6,000-7,000 yards, Ainsworth ordered the formation to bear left to an easterly heading, once again capping the “T” on his northbound adversary. He ordered a resumption of gunfire and told the destroyers *Nicholas* and *O’Bannon* (now in the rear) to fire torpedoes at the heavy ships to the south.

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21 Ainsworth, Task Group 36.1 Action Report, August 1, 1943, 7.
Despite the poor angle, the *O’Bannon* complied and fired its second (and last) spread of five torpedoes. The *Nicholas*, however, withheld its torpedoes, waiting for a better shot.

As the cruisers re-opened fire on this second leg across the top of Kula Gulf, the concussions of the *St. Louis*’s main batteries disabled its SG radar, forcing its gunners to simply fire in the same direction as the flagship. With the rear destroyers mostly preoccupied trying to line up a torpedo attack and the *Jenkins* using its SG radar to maintain its station, only the *Radford* provided any substantial gunfire among the destroyers.

Nevertheless, the American fire proved sufficiently effective to rattle Yamashiro’s four ships. The falling shells prompted lead-ship *Amagiri* to make smoke and reverse course in a wide turn to starboard after suffering four inconsequential hits. *Hatsuyuki*, next in line, spun around to port, retreating along the coast of Kolombangara. Two dud shells struck the vessel before it got away. (Before heading for Vila, both ships maneuvered toward an outcrop of land called Waugh Rock, convincing several American radar operators that they had intentionally beached themselves.) Seeing American projectiles plunging ahead of them, trailing ships *Nagatsuki* and *Satsuki* made a sharp course reversal to starboard, escaping with only one shell striking the former.  

Although Yamashiro’s four ships had arrived in Vila with relatively minor injuries, they had failed to launch any torpedoes, and their gunfire had been sparse and inaccurate. But they had completed their supply mission. Of course, they still needed to get home.

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At the top of the gulf, Ainsworth led his formation in another course reversal to the west to continue the action. But by now Yamashiro’s ships were disappearing to the south. The American gunners fired more shells in their direction, but none hit anything but seawater. On this third trip across the gulf the Nicholas fired a spread of torpedoes into the already sinking Niizuki while the Jenkins fired two more against a phantom sighting to the north. It was at this time that the floating bow of the Helena was spotted (its hull number “50” clearly visible), revealing the fate of this ship.

With his radar screen empty of contacts and confident that he had won a great victory, Ainsworth ordered the Nicholas and Radford to stay behind to rescue the hundreds of Helena crewmen in the water while he led the rest of the formation back to Tulagi Harbor. But the engagement was not entirely over. As they commenced rescue operations both destroyers detected a contact approaching from the northwest. This was the Suzukaze and Tanikaze, having come back to the scene after reloading their torpedo tubes. (Japanese ships, unlike American ones, carried two torpedoes for each tube.) But the returnees mistakenly thought the gulf was empty and retired before the American pair could close on them.

As the Nicholas and Radford commenced recovering their oil-soaked comrades again, Yamashiro’s vessels approached from the south along the Kolombangara coast, each having discharged its passengers and cargo at Vila. Navigating without radar, the Nagatsuki ran aground and was unable to be pulled free by the Satsuki. After this episode, the Satsuki, Hatsuyuki and two of Orita’s ships decided to take the longer route home through Blackett Strait and up the western side of Kolombangara Island. Yamashiro’s flagship Amagiri and one of Orita’s destroyers opted to return the way they
had come. In doing so, they clashed with the *Nicholas* and *Radford*. Both sides exchanged gunfire and torpedoes, but only a few American shells hit home, and everyone (except the stranded *Nagatsuki*) finally cleared out of the gulf by morning. On his way home, Ainsworth radioed that his force had sunk a minimum of six ships and compelled another to beach itself.23 That afternoon an American air strike destroyed the grounded *Nagatsuki*, adding one more ship to Ainsworth’s figure.

The week following the Battle of Kula Gulf (as this engagement was called) remained busy for both the American and Japanese navies. Ainsworth’s Task Force 18 and Merrill’s Task Force 19 typically alternated going up the “Slot” to conduct bombardments and naval sweeps or to escort American supply convoys. Recognizing the central Solomons as a key outpost protecting Rabaul, the Japanese made every effort to block the American advance on Munda by reinforcing their positions on New Georgia. American ground forces, like those of Japan at Guadalcanal, encountered difficulties trying to push their way through the defended jungle to capture the enemy airfield. The Americans realized that if they hoped to take Munda, they would have to choke off the flow of Japanese troops and supplies arriving into New Georgia via Kolombangara.

On the afternoon of July 12, Ainsworth’s task group, reinforced the day before with light cruiser HMNZS *Leander*, had just returned to Tulagi when Halsey ordered it to steam up the “Slot” again to intercept a “Tokyo Express” heading for Vila. Because an Allied coast watcher reported that the Japanese supply force consisted of about ten ships, Halsey decided to reinforce Ainsworth’s unit by instructing amphibious commander Turner to lend Ainsworth any destroyers he could spare for this evening’s sortie. As

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23 Ainsworth, Task Force 36.1 Action Report, August 1, 1943, 11.
Ainsworth made preparations for getting underway, he was informed that five destroyers under the command of Captain Thomas Ryan were being added to his task group. Although Ryan was the commander of Destroyer Squadron 12, the five ships he brought with him comprised vessels from three different squadrons which had never operated together before. Nor had any of them ever gone to sea with Ainsworth’s Task Force 18. Although the Guadalcanal battles had demonstrated the folly of sending newly assembled units of mixed origins into combat, Halsey believed that the apparent strength of the enemy force justified his decision to add Ryan’s destroyers.  

After a twenty minute conference with Ainsworth that afternoon, Ryan returned to his flagship where he briefed three of his skippers on the plan for that night. Around 1700 that evening Ainsworth’s three cruisers and five destroyers (under Destroyer Squadron 21 commander McInerney) departed Tulagi Harbor, with Ryan’s five destroyers leaving about a half hour later and joining en route. Once Ryan’s quintet caught the main body, Ainsworth led the combined group of thirteen ships northward along the western coast of Santa Isabel Island to hide their silhouettes from the bright quarter moon shining on this unusually clear night. The force steamed in its normal anti-aircraft circular formation, with McInerney’s destroyers forming a half circle in front of the cruisers and Ryan’s ships doing the same in the rear. At 2200 Ainsworth sent his crews to General Quarters. By midnight his force was cutting across the “Slot,” heading toward Visuvisu Point, the northern tip of New Georgia.

Approaching from the northwest was a ten-ship “Tokyo Express” under the command of Rear Admiral Shunji Izaki in his light cruiser *Jintsu*. The flagship and five

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destroyers provided escort for four destroyer-transports bringing men and supplies to Vila. Although Izaki had no radar, he had an aerial scout who informed him that an American force had been sighted off the northern cape of New Georgia. The four cargo-laden ships peeled off and steamed south into Vella Gulf, toward the west coast of Kolombangara. With his crews readying the torpedo batteries, Izaki continued on toward Kula Gulf with the remaining six ships.

At 0036 a black-painted Catalina flying boat (nicknamed “Black Cats”) scouting for Ainsworth radioed that five Japanese destroyers and one light cruiser, positioned second in line, were approaching from the northwest approximately 26 miles away. Ten minutes later Ainsworth ordered his vessels to assume battle formation. The van and rear destroyers began the movement toward a single column. McInerney led the way in destroyer Nicholas, followed by O’Bannon, Taylor, Jenkins and Radford. Next came the light cruisers Honolulu (flagship), Leander and St. Louis. Ryan, in the Ralph Talbot, led the rear destroyers, with the Buchanan, Maury, Woodworth and Gwin following him. But as in the previous battle, the destroyers had not had the time to get fully into column before the action began.

A few minutes after ordering battle formation, Ainsworth instructed the van destroyers to speed up and pull ahead a little. Ten minutes later McInerney in lead destroyer Nicholas radioed “I smell a skunk” (surface radar contact).25 Given the clear conditions, only three minutes elapsed before McInerney radioed that he had spotted his enemy to the northwest. Ainsworth responded by instructing him to bear to the left in order to keep outside of visual range. Meanwhile, Ainsworth led the rest of the task force

25 Francis McInerney, Destroyer Squadron Twenty-One Action Report, July 21, 1943, TBS Log, 152, Record Group 38, Box 140, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
Map 10. The Battle of Kolombangara
in a turn toward the enemy in order to close the range. Along the way he ordered Battle Plan A (no illumination) put into effect.

When McInerney reported that his destroyers were within torpedo range, Ainsworth gave him permission to fire. As McInerney’s Mark 15s began splashing into the water, Ainsworth bore his cruisers (and rear destroyers) to the left to unmask his guns. Although McInerney matched Ainsworth’s movements, the latter turned the main body inside the van destroyers, which were now off the Honolulu’s starboard bow. When the flagship Jintsu switched on its searchlight and illuminated the van destroyers a minute later, Ainsworth gave the order to fire. At a range of about 10,000 yards, thirty-eight six-inch guns, and many five-inch, came to life. Although Ainsworth’s plan called for a normal distribution of fire, the U.S. cruisers’ gun directors all targeted the fat “pip” of the Jintsu. The Leander, with primitive radar, simply fired into the searchlight, which most of the destroyers did as well. In the rear, Ryan’s destroyers were still in the process of forming into a column from their circular cruising disposition. Not until they straightened into a line were they able to fire torpedoes and open with guns.

Anticipating action, Izaki’s torpedomen were ready and waiting when their lookouts spotted the American force. Following quick torpedo solution calculations, the first of twenty-nine “Long Lances” began leaping into the water, two minutes before McInerney’s men began doing the same.26 Once its torpedoes were away, the Jintsu snapped open its searchlight to illuminate the enemy for the gun crews of his ships. However, except for one “over” shot that knocked down Leander’s radio antenna, none

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26 O’Hara, U.S. Navy Against the Axis, 183.
of the Japanese shells struck Ainsworth’s ships, although a couple came uncomfortably close to the *Nicholas*, which had been illuminated by the searchlight.

Once the Americans opened fire, Izaki ordered a turn away to port. The four destroyers behind Izaki’s flagship swung about and avoided all enemy gunfire and torpedoes. The *Jintsu*, however, was not so lucky. American gunfire smothered this light cruiser with exploding projectiles. In a minute or two the ship erupted in flames and drifted to a halt. Then one, perhaps two, of McInerney’s torpedoes struck the ship, breaking it in half and causing further explosions. However, the concentration of fire against the *Jintsu* gave the four trailing destroyers the opportunity to make their getaway. Lead-ship *Mikazuki*, however, lingered around the flagship to provide succor.

With the *Jintsu* obviously finished, American gunners began to switch off to other targets. Lookouts reported other ships set afire while radar operators told of “pips” brought to a standstill and disappearing from the screen. After more than five minutes of firing and the U.S. formation drawing away from their enemy, Ainsworth ordered a simultaneous course reversal to the northeast. Unfortunately, the flagship’s main guns had jarred the TBS antenna loose, causing its transmissions to grow faint. As a result, many ships failed to hear Ainsworth’s command to turn. When the *Honolulu* began to countermarch, the column disintegrated as the trailing ships made emergency turns to attempt to match the flagship or avoid colliding with other ships. The confusion was exacerbated by the thick smoke generated by the new flashless gunpowder, which reduced visibility considerably. As the ships came about, the *Leander* caught a torpedo
amidships on the port side, knocking it out of the battle. No other ships were hit, although a couple of the destroyers barely avoided being struck.27

After detailing destroyer Radford to stay by the damaged Leander, Ainsworth directed his ships northeastward, to clear the torpedo water (the wedge-shaped slice of ocean encompassing the enemy’s torpedo spreads) and re-engage. Once past the Leander and some semblance of order regained, Ainsworth ordered the resumption of gunfire. More rounds were fired at the Jintsu and the nearby Mikazuki before the latter decided to beat a hasty retreat to the north. During this phase of the gun battle the radars of the St. Louis were again rendered inoperative due to the concussion of its main batteries.

After a few minutes, the flagship’s radar operator reported that all six enemy ships had been sunk or stopped dead in the water. However, other vessels informed the task force commander that two vessels were believed to be retiring to the northwest. When the “Black Cat” overhead radioed that two enemy vessels were retreating back up the “Slot,” Ainsworth ordered McInerney to go after them. The destroyer commander swung his four remaining ships to the northwest, radioing that he was in pursuit and reminding his comrades not to “throw anything at us.”28

Ainsworth kept the rest of his unit pointed northeastwards. Once he was sure that he was clear of the torpedo water, he swung his cruisers to the north, then to the northwest to hunt down any enemy cripples. Believing that he had allowed the enemy’s lame ducks to escape at the Battle of Kula Gulf a week ago, Ainsworth was determined

27 Joseph Callahan, USS Ralph Talbot Action Report, July 16, 1943, 2, Record Group 38, Box 140, National Archives II, College Park, MD; Floyd Myhre, USS Buchanan Action Report, July 14, 1943, 2, Record Group 38, Box 140, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

28 Walden Ainsworth, Task Group 36.1 Action Report, August 3, 1943, 4, Enclosure B-1, TBS Log, 3, Record Group 38, Box 140, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
not to allow that to happen this time. By 0142 flagship *Honolulu* led the *St. Louis* and four of Ryan’s destroyers (the *Maury* had been detached to help the *Leander*) in a turn to the northwest in search of wounded prey.

McInerney, who had gone off in pursuit of the enemy ten minutes earlier, found only the burning wreck of the *Jintsu*. He ordered the *Nicholas* to fire torpedoes against the sinking hulk. With no other targets on his radar scope, McInerney reversed course to the southeast and headed back to join the rest of the task force. Before leaving the scene, he allowed his gunners to pump a few more rounds into the dying *Jintsu*.

As McInerney approached the *Leander* and its two escorts, Ainsworth was far to the northwest, hoping run down any cripples. At 0156 his radar scope registered a contact off the port bow at a distance of 23,000 yards. As the range closed, the radar contact separated into four distinct “pips.” Ainsworth began to wonder if this was his enemy or McInerney’s four destroyers returning from their foray. Ainsworth attempted to raise his destroyer commander on the TBS circuit, but there was no answer. The *Nicholas* was experiencing TBS troubles and could not hear Ainsworth’s transmissions. In addition, the *Honolulu*’s gunfire had by now completely disabled the forward TBS transmitter, requiring Ainsworth to relay his messages via telephone to the ship’s duplicate TBS set aft. Eventually, partial contact was established between McInerney and Ainsworth by routing the messages through the *O’Bannon*, but about six minutes had been wasted in the meantime. Moreover, Ainsworth remained uncertain of the exact location of his former van destroyers. Finally, Ainsworth decided to fire star shells over the unidentified vessels. The bursting flares disclosed the ships to be two-stack destroyers similar to those of McInerney’s squadron. But since McInerney did not
indicate that he was being illuminated, Ainsworth decided to take action. He directed a
turn to the right to unmask his batteries and ordered his ships to fire.

Ainsworth’s guns never got the chance to fire. His opponent had again beaten
him to the punch. After retiring from the scene of action, these four Japanese ships had
completed reloading their torpedo tubes and were coming back for another crack at the
American force. Spotting the American ships off their port bow, they fired thirty-one
“Long Lances” into the path of Ainsworth’s northwesterly-bound ships, then turned away
and retired, this time for good.

These Japanese missiles caught the American cruisers just as they started their
turn in preparation to fire. Both the Honolulu and the St. Louis had their bows blown off
by the exploding warheads. The Honolulu caught a potentially lethal second hit in the
stern, but the torpedo failed to explode. Although the bow hits on the two cruisers were
not mortal blows, the one that struck the destroyer Gwin was. In the confusion caused by
the disabling of these ships, the Woodworth’s stern side-swiped the Buchanan’s bow,
damaging both ships. The only American response to this Japanese blow was a fruitless
four-torpedo spread fired by the Ralph Talbot against the fleeing enemy.

In addition to disabling Ainsworth’s cruisers, the Japanese had also managed to
deliver the troops and supplies embarked aboard the four destroyer-transports. Detached
by Izaki before the engagement, the four destroyer-transports had steamed south into
Vella Gulf and dropped off its men and supplies at Eriel Cove on the west coast of
Kolombangara, where they were subsequently shuttled to Vila.

Ainsworth, on the other hand, was fortunate to get his three torpedoed cruisers
home safely. American fighters arrived at daybreak and successfully thwarted the efforts
of Japanese bombers to sink the injured vessels. Only the Gwin, whose crew could not stem the flow of water inundating the ship, did not make it back to Tulagi. After the Ralph Talbot picked up its crew, Ryan ordered his flagship to sink the settling destroyer with a torpedo. However, in a repeat of past experiences, the first Mark 15 went wide to the left and the next two failed to explode before the fourth successfully detonated and sank the ship. Thus ended the Battles of Kula Gulf (July 5-6) and Kolombangara (July 12-13).

**Assessment of the Battles in Kula Gulf**

Despite the loss of the Helena and Gwin and the wounding of his remaining cruisers, Ainsworth returned to Tulagi on the afternoon of July 13 convinced that he had won two major victories against the Japanese. Stating that he was aware of the tendency of past commanders to exaggerate the damage they had inflicted upon the enemy, Ainsworth conservatively reported that his task group sank a minimum of six enemy ships (two of them cruisers) and forced another to beach itself on the night of July 5-6.29 In the engagement a week later, Ainsworth claimed his ships sank one Jintsu-class cruiser and three destroyers, with two others probably damaged.30 Given such a score, it was no wonder that Ainsworth believed that he had dealt the enemy two devastating blows.

The truth, of course, was that Ainsworth had sunk only the destroyer Niizuki and the old light cruiser Jintsu, a 1920s-era warship that was half the size and possessed half the firepower of Ainsworth’s more modern Brooklyn-class cruisers. Given Ainsworth’s

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30 Walden Ainsworth, Letter to Chester Nimitz, July 16, 1943, 1, The Papers of Walden Ainsworth, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Ainsworth, Task Group 36.1 Action Report, August 3, 1943, 3-5.
version of events, he certainly did not recognize that these two battles resembled the
encounter off Tassafaronga, where a superior American force intent on destroying its
enemy with radar-controlled gunfire suffered the incapacitation of its cruisers from the
enemy’s well-placed torpedo shots. In that encounter Japanese destroyers had crippled
the main body of Task Force 67, a feat they repeated against the rebuilt American unit in
Kula Gulf seven months later.

Like their predecessors, Ainsworth and Merrill had a misplaced faith in the ability
of their radar-directed guns to hit the enemy. In the months leading up to the Kula Gulf
actions both admirals reported that in nighttime practice firings their radar-controlled
guns struck or straddled the target in the opening salvoes.31 Neither commander realized
that these satisfying results were obtained under atypical conditions, with one ship firing
at a single target. In combat situations gunners had difficulty keeping the guns pointed at
a target that was surrounded by other ships and numerous water splashes. As previously
mentioned, the returning echoes of all these objects usually led a director (who was trying
to keep his gun centered between two offsetting “pips”) to stray off his target. He often
ended up aiming the gun between two ships or between a ship and its nearby splashes.
Or sometimes a director lost track of a ship completely after mistakenly locking on to the
geyser popping up near the target.32 As these two battles demonstrated, a crowded radar
scope usually led to many misses. To sink a ship under such circumstances typically
required a high concentration of fire. This had been achieved against the Niizuki and

31 Aaron Merrill Narrative, Film No. 358, Recorded: March 27, 1945, 2, Interviews and
Statements, World War II, Box 22, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Ainsworth, Task
Group 36.1 Action Report, August 1, 1943, 7.

32 Crenshaw, South Pacific Destroyer, 237-238.
Jintsu, both of whom had had over a thousand shells fired at them in a matter of minutes. But despite visual and radar evidence, the other supposed sinkings were spurious. American gunners simply lacked the ability to hit the enemy consistently at night. Indeed, up to this point in the war, U.S. task forces had never sunk more than two enemy warships (at least one of which was a destroyer) on a given night.

The Japanese, on the other hand, had sunk four Allied cruisers at the Battle of Savo Island and five U.S. warships on the night of November 12-13, mostly with torpedoes. And they came close to another such success at the Battle of Tassafaronga, but improved damage control procedures and the nearby refuge of Tulagi Harbor saved three of the four U.S. heavy cruisers rocked by “Long Lance” hits.

Despite Japan’s record of effective torpedo fire, Ainsworth went to battle in Kula Gulf lacking a healthy respect for the underwater threat. Although his battle plan stated that Japan’s torpedoes were “a menace which should not be accepted unnecessarily,” Ainsworth’s actions betrayed his relative unconcern for this weapon. Such an attitude is perplexing in light of past experience, especially the encounter at Tassafaronga, which had led Admiral Wright to write that Japan probably possessed a torpedo with superior speed-distance characteristics. This notion was reinforced by the secret recovery of a “Long Lance” in Savo Sound, which sparked rumors that the enemy’s torpedoes had higher speeds and longer ranges than the U.S. Navy’s Mark 15. Ironically, it was the Helena’s Captain Charles Cecil who warned Ainsworth of this threat, but the latter dismissed such talk as nonsense.33 On July 9 Ainsworth wrote that the loss of the Helena was probably attributable to a submarine’s torpedo or an errant friendly torpedo since a

review of the plot showed that it was “just outside the range of possibility that any torpedo fired by the enemy destroyers could have hit the Helena.” Such a torpedo, he wrote, “would have had to run about 8,000 yards at 40 knots, and I don’t believe their torpedoes are that much better than ours.” (Ainsworth dismissal of this possibility is hard to understand since the current Mark 15, with a range of 9,200 yards at 33 knots or 6,000 yards at 46 knots, could nearly have made such a run.) Consequently, in both actions in Kula Gulf he brought his column across his opponent’s bow, exposing his beams to Japanese torpedo fire. Ainsworth virtually ignored the possibility of his enemy counterattacking with torpedoes set on lower speeds because he believed that his gunfire was both sufficiently heavy and accurate to disable the enemy almost instantly. Despite Wright’s experience at Tassafaronga, Ainsworth gave no thought to undertaking maneuvers to avoid incoming torpedoes. Instead, he, like Wright, maintained a steady course while his guns blasted away. Although Ainsworth did conduct simultaneous countermarches, these were not designed to thwart enemy torpedo attacks, but were undertaken in order to keep his guns bearing on the enemy.

After being hit by torpedoes in both battles (the first being a dud), Captain Colin Campbell of the St. Louis wrote on July 19 that U.S. task forces must avoid maintaining unchanged headings for periods longer than the time needed for an enemy torpedo to reach our lines. As had already been pointed out by Admiral Tisdale after the Battle of

34 Walden Ainsworth, Letter to William Halsey, July 9, 1943, 1, The Papers of Walden Ainsworth, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.

35 Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet, Destroyer Torpedo Doctrine and Manual of Torpedo Control (Destroyer Tactical Bulletin No. 1-43), February 20, 1943, 14, Record Group 38, Box 130, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

36 Ainsworth, Task Group 36.1 Action Report – Additional data on, March 15, 1944, 9.
Tassafaronga, Campbell wrote that steady courses were unnecessary since the *Brooklyn*-class light cruisers possessed fire-control mechanisms that allowed them to maintain accurate gunfire while maneuvering.\(^{37}\) Such sage advice, however, came too late to prevent the crippling of Cruiser Division 9.

Not until after the Battle of Kolombangara, with his entire cruiser force out of action, did Ainsworth finally come to realize his mistake in underestimating the torpedo threat. A few days after getting back to Tulagi he wrote Nimitz that “no one knows the fallacy of chasing Jap torpedo boats with cruisers better than I.” Given the damage inflicted on his force, he finally reckoned that the enemy possessed a torpedo better than the Mark 15. Yet he could not help but note that had he been sure of McInerney’s whereabouts when he had detected four approaching ships on the night of July 12-13, he might have “polished them off” without incurring further loss to his force.\(^{38}\)

Furthermore, he wrote that these two battles had proven that his tactics of employing rapid radar-controlled gunfire (supplemented by torpedo fire) to surprise and overwhelm the enemy were “eminently sound.”\(^{39}\) Thus, as far as Ainsworth was concerned, his battle-tested methods were the way to beat the enemy in nighttime warfare.

When Nimitz received dispatches and preliminary reports on the Kula Gulf battles from Ainsworth and Halsey, he was more troubled by the damage incurred than encouraged by the unconfirmed claims of enemy losses. On July 13 he wrote to Halsey and asked him if he thought that Ainsworth had been intentionally lured into a torpedo

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\(^{37}\) Colin Campbell, USS *St. Louis* Action Report, July 19, 1943, 12, Record Group 38, Box 139, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\(^{38}\) Ainsworth, Letter to Nimitz, July 16, 1943, 4.

\(^{39}\) Ainsworth, Task Group 36.1 Action Report, August 3, 1943, 11.
trap at the end of the second engagement. Or, he asked, was Ainsworth negligent in
avoiding the enemy’s torpedo water?40 In a letter to Ainsworth, Nimitz wrote that “the
enemy has consistently damaged us badly by torpedoes, and we should know why.”41
Due to the extent of American damage and his doubts about enemy sinkings, Nimitz
questioned whether these naval sorties into the confined waters of the central Solomons
were militarily justifiable. He wrote Halsey that naval losses sustained during efforts to
interdict Japanese supply runs were acceptable because they facilitated the overall
objective of capturing Munda. But clashes with the enemy for their own sake were not
worthwhile if American units endured disproportional casualties.42

Concerned over these two actions, Nimitz wondered if Ainsworth’s task force in
the second engagement had been too unwieldy. In light of past experience, Nimitz
questioned Halsey’s decision to add Ryan’s five unfamiliar destroyers to Ainsworth’s
command at the last minute. On the other hand, considering the fact that all four U.S.
cruisers had been put out of action (the Helena permanently), Nimitz asked Halsey at the
deck of July if it might not be better to use only well-trained destroyer units to intercept
the “Tokyo Expresses.” After all, he wrote, the navy’s new Fletcher-class destroyer “is,
practically speaking, a small, fast, highly maneuverable cruiser with ample torpedo and
gun power.”43

40 Chester Nimitz, Letter to William Halsey, July 13, 1943, 1, The Papers of William Halsey, Box
15, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

41 Chester Nimitz, Letter to Walden Ainsworth, July 27, 1943, 1, The Papers of William Halsey,
Box 15, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.


43 Ibid., 2.
This last proposal illustrated Nimitz’s bewilderment over the continued losses at sea. His suggestion that destroyers be sent out to do what the cruisers seemed unable to do flew in the face of traditional naval thinking, which held that light cruisers were the ideal weapons to smash enemy destroyers. Not surprisingly, Halsey respectfully quashed this proposition, arguing that Ainsworth’s and Merrill’s tactics were based upon the employment of the cruisers’ voluminous gunfire to maximize the navy’s superiority in radar gunnery. Even the firepower of the new five-gunned destroyers paled in comparison to the twelve- or fifteen-gunned light cruisers, which fired 130-pound shells versus the 55-pound projectiles of the destroyers. For Halsey, only the light cruisers provided the means to quickly destroy or disable the enemy from afar.

By early September Halsey and his staff had completed their analyses of the two Kula Gulf battles. Although Halsey adjusted the estimated number of enemy ships sunk by Task Force 18 downward, he was nevertheless pleased with Ainsworth’s performance. He praised the commander for the successful execution of his well-conceived battle plan, which was supposedly based on the Pacific Fleet’s Tactical Bulletin 5TB-42 (“Light Forces in Night Search and Attack”). Ainsworth, of course, had departed from many of the policies inherent in this doctrine, much to the approval of Halsey. The South Pacific commander wrote that “dogmatic acceptance of certain parts of 5TB-42 has apparently induced some fallacious thinking within the forces afloat,” especially in regards to the concept of dividing the task force into multiple attack units and the prescribed “V” and “Wedge” formations. As he saw it, any division of a task force was unwise because it invited defeat in detail. Additionally, Halsey believed that the “V” and “Wedge”

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dispositions (which placed destroyers behind the cruisers) foolishly relegated destroyers to the “status of clean-up units rather than primary weapons of offense.”\(^{45}\) As far as Halsey was concerned, it was better to keep the task force concentrated, with the torpedo weapon in the forefront.

However, while Halsey approved of Ainsworth’s abandonment of those sections of Tactical Bulletin 5TB-42 and its successor PAC-10 which were unsuitable to the conditions in the Solomons, he criticized Ainsworth for the way he handled his destroyers. By ordering McInerney’s van destroyers at the beginning of the action on the night of July 12-13 to turn away to keep out of visual range, Ainsworth, wrote Halsey, missed a “golden opportunity” to deliver an early torpedo attack. Halsey stressed that destroyer commanders should have the freedom to initiate a torpedo attack when an opportunity presents itself.\(^{46}\)

The American gunfire was not without fault either. The battle reports of both actions made it clear that Task Force 18 had failed to implement a normal distribution of fire. It was apparent that Ainsworth’s cruisers had all targeted the leading enemy ship in the first encounter and the light cruiser (the *Jintsu*) in the second. Halsey wrote that it was “absolutely essential” that U.S. gunners stop targeting the biggest “pip.” He believed that more training of radar evaluators, lookouts and spotters would prevent this from reoccurring in the future. It is somewhat surprising that Halsey seemed so emphatic about correcting this problem since he believed that Ainsworth’s opening gunfire on the

\(^{45}\) William Halsey, First Endorsement on CTG 36.1 Action Report of August 1, 1943, August 31, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 139, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

\(^{46}\) William Halsey, First Endorsement on CTG 36.1 Action Report of August 3, 1943, September 10, 1943, 3, Record Group 38, Box 140, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
night of July 12-13 had “paralyzed” the enemy’s fire control and “interfered
considerably” with his torpedo control. Of course, had Ainsworth actually
accomplished this, the Leander would not have been torpedoed nor would Ryan’s
destroyers have been subjected to so many near misses.

Although Halsey praised Ainsworth’s battle plan and its deviations from
established doctrine (i.e., 5TB-42 and PAC-10), the torpedoing of all four of his cruisers
clearly indicated a revision was necessary. He wrote that opening fire at the 8,000-
10,000 yard range prescribed in the battle plan brought the U.S. task force too close to the
enemy. Estimating (erroneously) that Japanese torpedoes could run a maximum of
10,000-12,000 yards at medium speed, Halsey stated that U.S. commanders should open
the battle from beyond 12,000 yards. Even though American radars might not be able to
spot the fall of shells from this far away, Halsey believed that the accuracy of the navy’s
radar-directed six- and five-inch batteries was sufficient to destroy the enemy from this
distance. As he saw it, firing at this range would maximize the U.S. Navy’s radar
advantage and minimize the danger from enemy torpedoes. (Presumably, enemy
torpedoes set on low speed could reach an American formation 12,000 yards away, but
the time needed for them to arrive would be prohibitively long, allowing a U.S. task force
the opportunity to turn away after destroying the enemy with gunfire.)

Of course, to make the most of its radar advantage, the navy had to keep it
functioning. Despite Nimitz’s previous instructions to carefully mount radar antennae
according to the strict guidelines prescribed by the Fleet Maintenance Office, U.S.

47 Ibid., 2, 5.

48 Halsey, Endorsement on CTG 36.1 Action Report of August 1, 1943, August 31, 1943, 1;
warships continued to be plagued with instances of radars going blank due to the shock of the ship’s own guns. Both the Honolulu and St. Louis lost one or more of their radars in the Kula Gulf actions due to the concussion of gunfire. Ainsworth’s flagship also lost the functionality of its TBS transmitter at a crucial time, a happenstance that created confusion on the night of July 12-13. Halsey reiterated Nimitz’s earlier directive to better shock-proof these antennae and repeated earlier directives to be assiduous in the plotting of enemy and friendly forces so as to avoid the kind of uncertainty encountered at the end of the second battle.

In his endorsement of the Kula Gulf actions, Halsey took the opportunity to question one of the navy’s most cherished practices – the use of continuous fire. The light cruiser crews were especially proud of the rapid rate of fire of their six-inch guns. Halsey, however, voiced the opinion that salvo fire (all guns firing in unison) might be preferable to continuous fire (where each gun or turret fired as soon as it was reloaded). Until now the Brooklyn-class light cruisers had mostly employed continuous fire because it produced a higher volume of fire. Halsey conceded that if the guns could be kept on the target, a constant rain of shells was more demoralizing to an enemy ship than intermittent fire. Continuous fire was also less likely to jar loose the radar and communications gear, which had troubled several of Ainsworth’s vessels. On the other hand, the constant blazing of the guns (even with the new flashless powder) not only presented a continual point of aim for enemy torpedomen, but made it more difficult for American lookouts to spot incoming torpedoes, a big consideration given the enemy’s preference for this weapon. In addition, the relentless roaring of the guns in continuous fire mode provided no opportunities to send and receive messages during a quiet period.
Lastly, it was far more difficult for gun directors to stay on the target and spot their shells when the guns were firing continuously. Given these considerations, Halsey recommended the adoption of salvo fire, except when shooting from beyond the range of the enemy’s torpedoes.49 (Unknown to Halsey or anyone else, this could never happen since Japan’s torpedoes outranged even the guns on U.S. battleships.)

These criticisms and observations not withstanding, Halsey was generally satisfied with Ainsworth’s accomplishments in Kula Gulf. In the (mistaken) belief that Task Force 18 had inflicted disproportionate losses against the enemy, he wrote that Ainsworth’s exploits “added a brilliant chapter to our naval history.”50 More importantly, he agreed with Ainsworth that his tactics were the solution to the navy’s past difficulties in nocturnal combat. Commanders simply had to make sure that they kept their force at least 12,000 yards away from the enemy and that they allowed the destroyers to fire torpedoes at the first opportunity.

Nimitz and his staff completed their review of the Kula Gulf actions in October. Agreeing with most of what Halsey had written, Nimitz appended to his report Halsey’s discussion of continuous versus salvo fire, his critique of Ainsworth’s poor fire distribution and his estimation of the capabilities of Japanese torpedoes. Nimitz also concurred with the assessment of his sea-going commanders that the accuracy of the navy’s radar-directed gunfire had been excellent. He speculated that the enemy was aware of his inferiority in radar gunnery and was therefore withholding his heavier ships until the circumstances changed or a favorable opportunity presented itself. But he noted

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50 Ibid., 1.
that the enemy was sufficiently confident in his torpedo weapon to send his destroyers to do battle with larger U.S. naval forces. The result, said Nimitz, has been naval encounters that pit American guns against Japanese torpedoes, with the latter scoring some notable successes.\footnote{Nimitz, Report on Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – July 1943, October 21, 1943, Annex D, 127.}

Since warships could not operate safely within range of the enemy’s shore-based aircraft during daylight, Nimitz recognized that nighttime engagements in the airbase-studded Solomon Islands theater was a phenomenon that was unlikely to change anytime soon. Consequently, he wrote that “the tactics of night actions deserve the most intensive study.”\footnote{Ibid.} Therefore in his analysis of the Kula Gulf actions, Nimitz closely examined Ainsworth’s modus operandi. As he saw it, the rear admiral’s tactics comprised four primary elements:

- The use of radar to find the enemy followed by a rapid approach to catch him by surprise.
- The employment of gunfire (supplemented with torpedo fire) to quickly overwhelm and disable the enemy before he can launch torpedoes.
- Turning away from the enemy to avoid torpedoes, but remaining close enough to resume firing after countermarching.
- Mopping up on the reverse course.\footnote{Ibid., 128.}

In terms of achieving surprise, Nimitz conceded that there was little more that could be done. But he disputed Ainsworth’s claim that he had caught the enemy unawares in both encounters. Given the speed with which the enemy put torpedoes into the water, Nimitz stated that it was doubtful that Ainsworth surprised the enemy in the first encounter and it was almost certain that he did not do so in the second. Nimitz
cautioned that it was dangerous to assume that our possession of superior radar
necessarily meant that the enemy was completely ignorant of our presence in the area.

As for Ainsworth’s employment of radar-directed gunfire to quickly dispatch the
enemy, Nimitz agreed that the volume and accuracy of the American gunfire was superb.
But he noted that in both cases U.S. guns failed to knock-out the enemy before he
launched torpedoes. This was partly due to the failure to implement a normal distribution
of fire. But Nimitz pointed out that this was difficult to achieve while capping the
enemy’s “T.” Steaming across the enemy’s bow made it tough for U.S. gunners to target
the opponent’s rearward ships, a problem evident in both Kula Gulf actions. (Nimitz
might have added that this maneuver was also unfavorable for torpedo fire.) While
smashing the enemy’s forward ships may lull U.S. skippers into a feeling of
invulnerability, Nimitz warned that the unmolested ships to the rear were just as likely to
fire torpedoes as the ships in front. And their position in the rear made their successful
retirement all the more likely. Although Nimitz did not recommend the abandonment of
the “T” maneuver, he reminded his readers that it was more suitable against an enemy
whose guns were the primary threat.

By July 1943, however, Japanese guns posed little danger to American task
forces. No Japanese shells had struck a U.S. warship since the Naval Battle of
Guadalcanal in mid-November 1942. At the Battles of Tassafaronga, Kula Gulf and
Kolombangara Japanese destroyers (and light cruiser Jintsu) had inflicted all of their
damage with torpedoes. Nimitz came to realize that part of the reason for the enemy’s
success in using this weapon was due to the fact that he often fired from relatively long
ranges (at least by American standards). Upon reflection, Nimitz wrote that the
American doctrine of firing torpedoes from close range might need to be reevaluated. He noted that a torpedo approaches a target more stealthily than a destroyer carrying it. The maxim that a torpedo attack should be pressed home might not always be wise since a charging destroyer spied by the enemy gives him warning of an impending attack and the opportunity to turn away. And unlike a running torpedo, a destroyer is exposed to enemy gunfire during its approach to the target, providing the enemy with a chance to stop the attack before it even begins. Lastly, Nimitz made the common sense observation that a torpedo fired from long range does just as much damage as one fired from close range.

With these thoughts in mind, Nimitz wrote that U.S. commanders must not assume that their enemy is going to withhold his torpedoes until the opponents close to medium- or high-speed firing ranges. The recent battles suggest that as soon as the distance between forces drops to maximum torpedo range, American captains should expect enemy torpedoes to be on the way. Of course, Nimitz conceded that the determination of this point is difficult since the capabilities of the enemy’s torpedoes are unknown. But he made it clear that evasive action needed to be undertaken sooner than previously thought.54

In his analysis Nimitz gave Ainsworth credit for attempting to foil enemy torpedo attacks with his various turn-aways, but said that they came too late due to an underestimation of the speed-distance characteristics of the enemy weapon. But this praise is unwarranted since a careful reading of the battle reports makes it clear that Ainsworth ordered these countermarches because his guns would no longer bear on the enemy, not because he was fearful of incoming torpedoes. In reality, Ainsworth seemed

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54 Ibid., Annex D, 131.
unaware that the presentation of his beams to the enemy for prolonged periods might invite a devastating counterblow.

Although Nimitz failed to discern the true reason for Ainsworth’s course reversals, he made the astute observation that the damage inflicted against Task Force 18 was not necessarily indicative of the merits of Ainsworth’s tactics since torpedo hits were largely a matter of luck. Instead, Nimitz wrote that a commander’s conduct in battle should be judged by whether or not enemy torpedoes cross his path at all. Although Nimitz refrained from saying anything more on this issue, the implication was clear – that Ainsworth had blundered three times into the enemy’s torpedo water. Indeed, with dud hits on the *St. Louis* and *Honolulu* and near misses on these and other vessels, Ainsworth was actually fortunate that his losses were not greater than they were.

While the Japanese were achieving success with their torpedo attacks, it was evident that the U.S. destroyers were not. In the first engagement McInerney’s destroyers fired low-percentage shots against the sterns of the *Suzikaze* and *Tanikaze* retiring to the westward and then against the sterns of the second group withdrawing toward Vila to the south. Not surprisingly, none of these found their mark. In the second engagement, the only American torpedoes to hit home were the few that finished off the already doomed *Jintsu*.

These results are especially disappointing in light of the fact that for the first time U.S. destroyers went into battle with the magnetic influence exploder deactivated. On June 12 Admiral Tisdale (who had relieved Ainsworth as Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet) had ordered the deactivation of this mechanism on those torpedoes fired at the
basic depth setting. Only the “deep” torpedoes of a spread (the two set to run four feet below the rest) were to continue to use the influence feature. Interpreting this directive liberally, tender personnel had deactivated the magnetic device on all of the torpedoes aboard McLnerney’s destroyers. (They had not had time to change the torpedoes on Ryan’s destroyers.) Thus, McLnerney’s vessels could dispense with the problematic under-the-keel shots and shoot to hit, without the worry of premature explosions. But poor firing angles vitiated their chances for success.

Nimitz was somewhat at a loss on how to improve the effectiveness of his destroyers beyond the previously-stated recommendation to grant the destroyer commander the freedom to fire torpedoes at his discretion. Although the navy’s daytime doctrine called for the initiation of an independent torpedo attack once the heavy ships engaged, Nimitz hesitated to advocate such a course of action at night. Perhaps recalling the experience at the Battle of Cape Esperance, he wrote that destroyers that went off to undertake torpedo strikes risked interposing themselves into the cruisers’ line of fire, where they would force the cessation of their gunfire or perhaps be subjected to friendly fire. Additionally, the detachment of the destroyers was likely to lead to the task group commander losing track of them. The uncertainty of their whereabouts would result in the cruisers’ hesitation to take a new target under fire, as had happened at the end of the second engagement, with costly consequences. Therefore, until some form of radar

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55 Mahlon Tisdale, Change Number 2 to Destroyer Tactical Bulletin 1-43, June 12, 1943, 1, Record Group 313, Box 33, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

recognition system (IFF) was introduced, Nimitz saw no alternative to keeping the 
destroyers loosely tied to the main body.\textsuperscript{57}

In addition, Nimitz warned his commanders that a fleeing enemy is not 
necessarily retiring for good. Nimitz wrote that evidence now indicated that Japanese 
warships possessed extra torpedoes and that it was likely that the enemy had perfected a 
procedure for reloading his tubes at sea. He wrote that the second group of enemy ships 
encountered by Ainsworth on the night of July 12-13 was almost certainly the same ships 
fired upon in the first phase. He speculated (correctly) that these vessels had withdrawn 
from the area only to reload their tubes, whereupon they returned to conduct another 
torpedo attack, one which disabled the \textit{Honolulu} and \textit{St. Louis} and mortally wounded the 
\textit{Gwin}. Nimitz cautioned his commanders not to assume that a retreating enemy was 
“fleeing in terror,” but may simply be preparing to reengage.\textsuperscript{58}

Lastly, Nimitz admonished his officers not to presume that ships which 
disappeared from radar scopes were necessarily sunk. He wrote that while objects shown 
on radar are probably legitimate, those which are not shown do not mean that they no 
longer exist. Because of the discrepancies among the radar screens of vessels in the same 
task force, Nimitz realized that these electronic eyes often failed to detect all the 
surrounding contacts. As an example he noted Ainsworth’s confident declaration that 
none of the enemy ships left the scene of battle under their own power during the first 
phase of action on the night of July 12-13. But the evidence now indicated that four 
Japanese destroyers had made good their escape, only to return and torpedo three of

\textsuperscript{57} Nimitz, Report on Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – July 1943, October 21, 1943, Annex D, 
132.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., Annex D, 133.
Ainsworth’s ships later that night. Being privy to code-breaking intelligence, Nimitz also knew that some of the supposed enemy sinkings in the past were false. Nimitz therefore warned his commanders to be wary of assuming that a sparse radar screen meant a decimated enemy. He wrote that over-estimation of enemy damage could not only affect strategic decisions, but could “cause over-confidence in the tactics previously employed.” This was especially true in the cases of Wright and Ainsworth, both of whom believed that their methods had produced victories. Nimitz likened the situation to a businessman who, through errors in his bookkeeping, believes his operation is making money, when in fact he is actually going into debt. If the navy wished to stay out of the “red,” Nimitz said it would have to improve its aptitude in radar evaluation.59

In the end, Nimitz was less pleased with Ainsworth’s conduct in the Kula Gulf battles than Halsey had been. Too much damage had been incurred while too little had been inflicted upon the enemy. Although Nimitz hoped that future losses could be kept to a minimum by keeping the cruisers farther away from the enemy and by undertaking more expeditious turn-aways, he seemed at a loss on how to improve the effectiveness of his destroyers.

In a departure from usual practice, the staffers at COMINCH headquarters did not wait for Nimitz to issue his report before completing their analysis of the Battle of Kula Gulf on October 15, six days before CINCPAC issued its July report. And in contrast to Nimitz, King reviewed the Kula Gulf battles separately.

For the action that took place on the night of July 5-6, King discerned three major problems – the failure to achieve surprise, the failure to avoid enemy torpedoes and the

59 Ibid. Annex D, 133-134.
ineffectiveness of the U.S. destroyers. Whereas Nimitz believed that there was little else that Ainsworth could have done to achieve surprise, King thought Ainsworth threw away his chance to catch his enemy off guard. He noted that twenty-one minutes elapsed between the time the enemy was detected by radar (0136) and the commencement of fire (0157). Not only was this too long of a delay in opening the action, but King counted forty-nine TBS transmissions during this period. He speculated (wrongly) that the enemy probably intercepted this radio traffic and used direction finding to ascertain the general whereabouts of Ainsworth’s force. But even if the enemy had not been listening in on Ainsworth’s TBS frequency, King believed that the Japanese had spotted Task Force 18 before it opened fire. He noted that past encounters indicated that the enemy appeared to spy U.S. formations at great distances, allowing them to initiate early torpedo attacks. King pointed to the torpedoing of the *Helena* as evidence of this at Kula Gulf, which he believed was due to the launching of torpedoes before the commencement of American gunfire rather than the supposed superior attributes of the enemy’s weapon.60

King was also critical of Ainsworth’s failure to avoid the enemy’s torpedo water. He noted that Ainsworth kept his force on a constant heading for seven minutes prior to the commencement of fire, followed by another six minutes afterward. King believed (correctly) that the enemy spotted this elongated column before the American guns came to life, giving them an ideal target. Echoing the comment made by Captain Campbell of the *St. Louis*, King wrote that the superior fire control systems aboard the light cruisers

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60 Ernest King, Battle Experience, Naval Operations Solomon Islands Area, June 30 - July 12, 1943, October 15, 1943, Chapter 52, 8-10, Record Group 334, Box 443, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
made the maintenance of a steady course unnecessary and needlessly exposed the force to enemy torpedoes.  

Not only did Ainsworth err by holding his course too long, but he drew too near the enemy as well. By opening fire at the oncoming enemy at 8,000-10,000 yards, Ainsworth, said King, allowed the two forces to converge to dangerously close ranges. Moreover, King pointed out that it made little sense for Ainsworth to have steamed toward the enemy on the reverse leg. Since the element of surprise was gone, the force should have made a wide countermarch in order to stay beyond the reach of the enemy’s torpedoes.

King, however, was most disappointed with the poor American torpedo fire, which he said was “late, uncoordinated and undoubtedly ineffective.” Part of the problem was that the destroyers had not had sufficient time to move from their circular screening dispositions to their assigned stations in the battle line. Consequently, when the order was given to fire, three of the four destroyers were unable to fire torpedoes.

But King viewed the battle plan as the leading culprit. Although Ainsworth’s stated goal was to achieve a favorable position for the early initiation of gun and torpedo fire, King discerned that his plan was designed to maximize the potential of the former at the expense of the latter. Disagreeing with Halsey and Nimitz, King wrote that it would have been better for Ainsworth to have sent his agile destroyers toward the enemy to conduct a close-range torpedo attack while the light cruisers provided gunfire support.

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 16, 25.
63 Ibid., 10.
from beyond the range of the enemy’s torpedoes. King wrote that “Until our destroyers are freed from screening heavy ships and released to launch a torpedo attack coordinated and controlled, we will not enjoy torpedo success.”

Not until December 6, 1943 did COMINCH headquarters issue its review of the Battle of Kolombangara. Although it provided its readers with a thorough account of this engagement, few comments were included. Since the two Kula Gulf battles were so similar, King and his staffers may have felt it unnecessary to repeat their earlier observations, which were just as applicable to this action. Hence, they made only two noteworthy remarks. In reference to Ainsworth’s speculation that the long-range torpedoing of the Honolulu, St. Louis and Gwin was radar-directed, King replied that it may simply have been that the enemy spotted the U.S. force visually using high grade glasses. Insightfully, if belatedly, King wrote that “We may be underestimating our enemy’s eyesight.”

King’s other notable comment was his newfound belief that the enemy’s torpedoes were, in fact, superior to the Mark 15. Given the apparently long-range torpedoing of three U.S. warships at the end of the battle, King and his staff now estimated that the enemy’s underwater weapon probably possessed a low-speed range of 24,000 yards, which was 9,000 yards longer than the Mark 15.

Overall, King saw the engagements in Kula Gulf as a replay of past encounters, where the enemy demonstrated a skill in torpedo warfare that contrasted sharply with the

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64 Ibid., 16, 39.

65 Ernest King, Battle Experience, Naval Operations Solomon Islands Area, July 12 – August 10, 1943, December 6, 1943, Chapter 54, 14, Record Group 334, Box 444, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

66 Ibid., 15.
dismal American performance. After nearly a year of combat in the Solomons, the U.S. seemed incapable of exploiting its superior radar technology to master its opponent in nighttime warfare. Fortunately for the United States, its redemption was at hand as the destroyermen took center stage in the South Pacific.
CHAPTER FIVE
ENTER THE DESTROYERMEN

Arleigh Burke Comes to the South Pacific

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Lieutenant Commander Arleigh Burke was employed as an inspector of gun mounts at the Naval Gun Factory in the Washington, DC Navy Yard. As one of the few ordnance specialists in the officer corps with expertise in the design and production of weaponry, Burke’s services were in high demand at the Bureau of Ordnance as war production began to accelerate in the months leading up America’s entry into World War II. Like most officers, Burke sought combat duty when the war broke out, but the commandant of the Gun Factory refused to let him go, declaring that “the services of this officer cannot be spared.”¹ For over a year Burke grew increasingly restive as news of the war overseas made him long for a combat post. Finally, in January 1943, a suitable replacement was found to relieve Burke at the Gun Factory and the now Commander Burke was ordered to take command of Destroyer Division 43. Although two of his four ships were still working up on the U.S. East Coast, Burke opted to join the other two vessels that had just arrived in the South Pacific. He took a train to San Francisco, then joined the transport President Monroe, which was conveying a detachment of Marines to Noumea, New Caledonia.

Arriving at his destination in early February 1943, Burke went to South Pacific Headquarters where a staffer informed him that his flagship Waller was currently anchored in Havannah Harbor on the island of Efate in the New Hebrides. Hitching a

ride aboard the light cruiser Denver, Burke arrived in Efate and reported to the task force commander – Rear Admiral Merrill. To Burke’s delight, his Destroyer Division 43, along with Destroyer Division 44, was assigned to screen Merrill’s Cruiser Division 12, the nucleus of Task Force 68. This unit had already seen action and Burke was grateful for such a plum assignment.

Of course, before he could engage the enemy in a meaningful way, Burke had to gather up his division. When he arrived in Efate none of his ships was there, although his flagship Waller entered the harbor a few days later. But the Saufley was away and the Renshaw and Philip had not yet reported to the South Pacific. Somewhat naively, Burke made an immediate request to Halsey’s headquarters asking that his division be assembled so that he could train and indoctrinate it. This appeal, however, provoked some amusement from the seasoned staffers at Noumea. They informed the newcomer that destroyers were in short supply and could not be spared from escort duties in order to permit unit training. Thus, for the time being, Burke was a one-ship division commander.

Although Burke was an ordnance specialist, he had a particular fondness for destroyer duty. He had been the executive officer of the Craven from 1937 to 1939 followed by captain of the Mugford until his transfer to the Naval Gun Factory in mid-1940. Despite a record of excellence in these two assignments, Burke realized that destroyer warfare had undergone some changes since then. To get himself up to speed with recent developments, Burke studied the action reports of his predecessors, including the secret Battle Experience bulletins distributed by King’s headquarters. He later wrote that he wanted to

see if I could figure out how the battle could be done as well as they had been able to fight it. I also wanted to find out whether or not
anybody made any mistakes, and if so I didn’t want to repeat those same mistakes.\textsuperscript{2}

The examination of these past actions convinced Burke that the destroyers, especially, had not been employed very well. Although they had fought well individually, their performance as a whole had not been good. This revelation prompted Burke to redouble his efforts to assemble his division in order to properly prepare it for battle. But each time Burke made this appeal, the answer was always the same — destroyers were needed for screening duties and could not be withdrawn for training purposes at this time.\textsuperscript{3}

Burke had gotten his first taste of battle on the night of March 5-6 while embarked aboard the \textit{Waller}, which scouted ahead of Merrill’s three cruisers and two destroyers. During that engagement the \textit{Waller’s} radar operator had been the first to detect the two Japanese destroyers moving northwards along the Kolombangara coast in Kula Gulf. The \textit{Waller’s} captain wanted to launch a spread of torpedoes, but Burke doubted the authenticity of the contact and withheld his permission. Not until Merrill alerted his task force of the presence of two enemy ships did Burke finally give the order fire torpedoes. But just as the \textit{Waller} emptied its tubes, Merrill’s cruisers opened fire. Although both Japanese ships had been sunk without damage to Task Force 68, Burke was disappointed with himself. By doubting his subordinates, he had forsaken the chance to dispense the enemy with a surprise torpedo attack, forcing the cruisers to expose

\textsuperscript{2} Arleigh Burke Narrative, Film No. 411, Recorded: July 31, 1945, 3, 11, Interviews and Statements, World War II, Box 4, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 3.
themselves with their gunfire. This experience taught Burke that he needed to trust his personnel and to act quickly on any information.4

Just over a week after this encounter in Kula Gulf Merrill issued a battle plan to his captains that would be employed in the event of another encounter with an enemy surface force. The plan focused on the utilization of the cruisers’ gunfire and reflected the prewar battle doctrines. It stated that when a radar contact was made, the destroyers were to abandon their anti-submarine disposition and fall in astern of the cruisers. (An alternate option had the destroyers moving ahead or both ahead and astern of the cruisers, but the “normal deployment stations” of the destroyers” was to be in the rear.) Once the destroyers fell into line the cruisers were to open fire and “soften up” the enemy. While this was going on, the destroyers were to silently make their way toward the enemy to conduct a torpedo attack. As in the case of the navy’s daytime fleet action and “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” (5TB-42) doctrines, the main body’s gunfire would both mask and prepare the way for a torpedo strike. Thus, as Merrill saw it, the torpedo attack would (hopefully) be a surprise to the enemy not because they were unaware of the American presence, but because they were preoccupied with fending off the cruisers’ gunfire.5

During the spring of 1943 Merrill drilled his cruisers and available destroyers constantly in both day and night exercises. On some occasions Task Force 19 (renamed from Task Force 68 in mid-March) practiced Merrill’s battle plan against Rear Admiral

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4 Burke Narrative, Film No. 411, Recorded July 31, 1945, 4-6; E.B. Potter, Admiral Arleigh Burke (New York: Random House, 1990), 72.

5 Aaron S. Merrill, Operating Instructions, March 14, 1943, Enclosure A, 6-7, 10, Record Group 38, Box 262, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
Harry Hill’s underutilized force of old battleships. Once back in port, Merrill usually assembled his skippers in the local officer’s club to discuss these exercises in an informal atmosphere. Seeking frank feedback, Merrill was soon confronted with the frustrations of his destroyermen. The veterans of the Guadalcanal campaign were especially disgusted with the way that they had been shackled to the cruisers, denying them the opportunity to hit the enemy hard with their torpedoes. Although Merrill’s plan called for an eventual destroyer attack, Burke voiced the opinion that it should not be necessary for Merrill to order such a strike. Rather, the destroyers should be concentrated and prepared to execute an attack at once, without orders. Intrigued by Burke’s ideas, Merrill asked him to submit a summary of his proposals in writing.6

On May 7, 1943, Burke handed Merrill his report entitled “Employment of Destroyers.” As Burke admitted on the title page, this doctrine was not his alone nor was it original. Its compilation was a joint effort that included recommendations not only from the captains of his destroyer division, but others gleaned from the action reports of their predecessors, including the Battle Experience bulletins from COMINCH headquarters. Also on the cover page was the document’s premise – that an examination of the nighttime battles of the past clearly demonstrated that U.S. destroyers have so far been ineffectual.7

According to Burke’s report, the failure to surprise the enemy was the leading cause of the destroyers’ lack of success to date. Burke speculated that this advantage was probably lost due to the enemy’s interception of American pre-battle TBS transmissions.

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6 Potter, *Admiral Arleigh Burke*, 76-77.

7 Arleigh Burke, Employment of Destroyers, May 7, 1943, 1, The Papers of Arleigh A. Burke, Pre-CNO Files, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
And surprise was undoubtedly forfeited on those occasions when the cruisers opened fire before the destroyers’ torpedoes had a chance to reach the enemy formation. To be more effective, U.S. destroyers needed to strike their opponent with torpedoes before he was aware of the Americans’ presence. But a fast, coordinated torpedo attack was difficult to achieve under the operating procedures then in place.

One practice inhibiting a surprise torpedo strike was the destroyers’ anti-submarine cruising formation. The increasing Japanese submarine menace had prompted American commanders steaming in the “Slot” to keep their escorting destroyers arrayed around the main body until the detection of a surface enemy. Despite numerous attempts to quickly concentrate the destroyers into an attack formation during nighttime exercises, Burke came to the conclusion that it was not possible to execute an expeditious and coordinated torpedo attack from an anti-submarine disposition. At best, a moderately swift, ragged attack or series of individual attacks were all that could be achieved. His solution was radical, but simple – abandon this circular formation. After much thought on the matter, Burke realized that Japanese submarines, like their American and German counterparts, almost certainly operated on the surface at night. Therefore unless an enemy boat happened to appear on the beam of an American task force, it was just as likely to be detected by destroyers concentrated in the van as those fanned out around the main body. And since a submarine needed to be off the bow of its quarry in order to obtain a good shot, the beams of the cruisers could be left unguarded. Therefore the destroyers could assume a column formation in the van of a task force and be ready to attack instantly without sacrificing much in terms of anti-submarine protection.8

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8 Ibid., Enclosure A, 2-4.
However, even if the destroyers were prepared to attack, they often did not do so immediately. In his report, Burke reprinted some of the comments made regarding previous destroyer actions. These included:

Destroyers are an offensive type and should be so employed. Doctrine should prescribe when to open fire. Doctrine should provide for destroyer torpedo attack. It should not be necessary for the O.T.C. to order it. The destroyers appear not to have had freedom of action guided by doctrine.9

With these thoughts in mind, Burke contended that the most opportune time for a torpedo attack was immediately following detection of the enemy. This would mean that the destroyers would have to begin their attack run based on incomplete radar information. Not only might it not be possible to determine the exact composition of the enemy beforehand, but it would probably be necessary to hurriedly calculate torpedo solutions during the high-speed run-in to the launching point. Burke admitted that this involved some risk and that a better target might materialize after the destroyers had shot their bolt. But he believed that an early, coordinated attack was more likely to succeed (due to surprise) than a delayed strike based on a more complete picture of the situation. After all, he wrote, history has demonstrated that “luck usually rides with the bold.” He added that while no force will ever be completely ready to attack, neither will the enemy be completely prepared to repel it.10

Of course it availed the destroyers little if they were ready and willing to strike at once but were obliged to wait for the task force commander to give the order to do so. As Burke saw it, having to wait for permission to attack caused a delay that often prevented success. In the battles to date, the destroyers had usually been tied to the cruisers and

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9 Ibid., Enclosure B, 1.
10 Ibid., Enclosure B, 2.
been compelled to seek permission to fire torpedoes (usually from their station in the battle line). Burke wrote that an effective torpedo attack could only be made if the destroyer commander was authorized to begin a torpedo attack at his discretion. Burke admitted that it was difficult for an admiral to grant a junior officer a power which affected the entire task force in such a profound way. But Burke saw no alternative. As mentioned, having to request permission to attack would delay the strike and perhaps disclose the Americans’ presence to the enemy. More importantly, Burke argued that the destroyer commander was in a far better position to determine the most auspicious time to launch a torpedo attack than the task force commander preoccupied with cruiser operations in the rear. Therefore, if the destroyer attack was to be effective, it had to be initiated by the division (or squadron) leader.¹¹

For Burke, the ideal attack was one where the unseen destroyers approached the enemy’s bow and fired torpedoes across his path, followed by a retirement in formation, which was necessary to enable the radar operators of the main body to identify them as friendly. In order to facilitate surprise, the cruisers would withhold their gunfire until the torpedoes had been given the opportunity to reach their targets. Firing at the moment that the torpedoes began to hit home would add to the confusion, making the torpedo attack all the more effective. Of course, if the destroyers were discovered by the enemy during their approach, Burke wrote that the cruisers should immediately open fire. In such a situation the U.S. destroyers should then press their attack closer than anticipated, to make it more difficult for the enemy to elude the attack with a turn-away.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., Enclosure B, 2-3.

¹² Ibid., Enclosure B, 1.
In short, Burke’s new doctrine focused on creating the conditions necessary to permit an early torpedo attack to surprise the enemy. In doing so he sought to end the policies that gave scant attention to the offensive potential of the destroyers and regarded them primarily as guardians of the cruisers. With Merrill responding favorably (albeit a bit cautiously) to Burke’s recommendations, Task Force 19 possessed a doctrine that, if effectively implemented, might well produce victories. Unfortunately for the United States, it was Ainsworth’s task force rather than Merrill’s that engaged the Japanese twice in Kula Gulf, with poor results.

At the end of May 1943 Burke was ordered to take command of Destroyer Division 44, with his flag in the Conway. Burke was unhappy with this transfer because the 44th was withdrawn from Merrill’s task force and assigned escort duties. Instead of drilling his division in combat maneuvers, he was now shepherding cargo vessels to Guadalcanal. Moreover, he had little opportunity to train his ships as a unit. In the last month or so of his tenure as the commander of Destroyer Division 43, he had been able to collect all four of his ships on occasion. Now, as the commander of the 44th Division, he was lucky to gather two of his vessels on his journeys to-and-from Guadalcanal.

Burke’s stint guarding supply vessels came to a happy end on July 9 when, as commander of Destroyer Division 44, he also became the commander of Task Group 31.2 with the informal title of ComDesSlot (Commander Destroyers, Slot). Serving directly under Rear Admiral Theodore Wilkinson, who had replaced Turner as the commander of Task Force 31 (the amphibious fleet), Burke controlled both his own division plus some other destroyers operating from Purvis Bay (a new anchorage on Florida Island a few miles from the smaller Tulagi Harbor). As an independent unit
assigned to perform various bombardment missions and combat sweeps up the “Slot.” Task Group 31.2 was exactly the kind of command that Burke had desired.

In expectation of action against a “Tokyo Express,” Burke devised a battle plan for his task group which he practiced at every opportunity. The plan divided the destroyers into two columns of three or four ships each, which he called divisions A-1 and A-2. Burke would personally command the first group, while Destroyer Division 15’s Commander Rodger Simpson led the second. To avoid detection by enemy reconnaissance aircraft, the two columns would hug the coast of Santa Isabel Island on the way up the “Slot” and refrain from shooting at enemy planes that approached. When radar detected a surface enemy, Burke would immediately lead the first division in a torpedo attack, zigzagging during its approach to the target. When the distance to the enemy dropped to about 10,000 yards (the range which Burke believed the Japanese fired their torpedoes), he would lead division A-1 in a radical course change. If the enemy spotted him, he hoped this feint would draw their torpedo fire. Burke would then resume a course that would place his division 6,000 yards from the enemy, about thirty degrees off his bow. From this position all ships in division A-1 would fire a half salvo of torpedoes, followed by a ninety degree turn away from the enemy. Once 8,000 yards away from the opponent, Burke would lead his division in another ninety degree turn, bringing his unit into a course roughly parallel to the enemy’s and toward division A-2.

While division A-1 was undertaking this torpedo attack, the ships of division A-2 were to maintain a position just inside the maximum effective radar-directed gunfire range. If the Japanese discovered Burke’s division during its torpedo run, Simpson’s ships would commence firing to distract the enemy. Otherwise, they were to remain
quiet, with their guns trained on the target. Once Burke’s torpedoes began exploding among the enemy ships, Simpson would lead division A-2 in its torpedo run. While he was doing this, Burke’s vessels would commence firing to keep the enemy’s attention away from the new threat. If any enemy ships remained after Simpson’s torpedo strike, Burke would lead his division in a second torpedo attack, which would be covered by gunfire from Simpson’s ships.13

With this battle plan, Burke hoped to smash the enemy by continually surprising him with torpedo and gunfire attacks from various directions. He later explained that the genesis for this battle plan was based on the tactics employed by Roman General Scipio Africanus. This ancient commander had defeated Hannibal by dividing his own force into two parts and striking the Carthaginian army with both in succession. After half the Roman army attacked, it would temporarily retreat while the other half hit Hannibal’s force from another direction. The two halves of the Roman army would take turns attacking and falling back until the enemy was defeated. Burke credited his extensive reading of military history as a junior officer for enabling him to see that Scipio’s principles could be applied to the naval war in the Solomons.14

On July 25 South Pacific Headquarters ordered Burke’s Destroyer Division 44 back to Espiritu Santo for rest and refit. Wanting to stay in the combat zone, Burke asked permission to transfer his flag to one of the destroyers of Task Group 31.2 outside of his

13 Arleigh Burke, Destroyers of Task Force Thirty-one, July 22, 1943, 1-3, The Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO Files, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Arleigh Burke, Battle Plan, August 1, 1943, 1-3, The Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO Files, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Burke Narrative, Film No. 411, Recorded July 31, 1945, 21-22.

14 Arleigh Burke, An Evening with Admiral Burke (Interview by Professor Robert Langdon), March 8, 1968, 18-19, Command File, World War II, Individual Persons, No Box, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Arleigh Burke Narrative, Film No. 411-1, Recorded: July 31, 1945, 16, Interviews and Statements, World War II, Box 4, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
division. Wilkinson granted Burke’s request, but reminded him that he would have to be rotated out soon. Burke hoped to hang on long enough to get the opportunity to test his new battle plan against the enemy. He almost got his chance on the night of August 1-2 when four Japanese destroyers made a supply run to reinforce Vila. However, Burke’s force, operating at the top of Kula Gulf, failed to intercept the “Tokyo Express” because its commander approached his destination via Vella Gulf, on the western side of Kolombangara. The Japanese destroyers transferred their troops and supplies to barges operating on the southern coast of Kolombangara, where they were transshipped through Blackett Strait to Vila. Although American PT boats engaged these Japanese destroyers in Blackett Strait, none of their torpedoes hit the enemy. (It was on this night that destroyer *Amagiri* rammed and sank future President John Kennedy’s *PT-109*.)

Unfortunately for Burke, South Pacific headquarters ordered him to return to his destroyer division and relinquish command of Task Group 31.2 to Destroyer Division 12’s Commander Frederick Moosbrugger on August 3.

**The Battle of Vella Gulf**

Moosbrugger did not have to wait long before being sent into action. On his second day as Commander Destroyers, Slot, the headquarters of Task Force 31 summoned him to Guadalcanal. Admiral Wilkinson’s chief of staff informed Moosbrugger that he would soon be ordered northward to strike the next “Tokyo Express.” Returning across Savo Sound to Purvis Bay, Moosbrugger called a meeting aboard his flagship *Dunlap* to gather some information on his prospective enemy. Along with his second in command, Commander Roger Simpson (the commander of Destroyer Division 15 / division A-2), Moosbrugger assembled various motor torpedo boat
squadron leaders, whose boats had recently clashed with Japanese destroyers and barges in the central Solomons during the past two weeks. They informed Moosbrugger of Japanese tactics and habits, including their tendency of late to approach Vila via Vella Gulf rather than Kula Gulf.

Later that afternoon, on August 5, Wilkinson’s Task Force 31 headquarters radioed Moosbrugger to be prepared to sortie the next morning to intercept an expected “Tokyo Express” in Vella Gulf. The message also summoned the commander back to Guadalcanal that evening for another conference. This time Moosbrugger conferred directly with Wilkinson himself. The admiral informed him that intelligence sources indicated that the Japanese were planning another supply run to Vila the following night. Since Ainsworth’s task force had been put out of action in Kula Gulf last month and Merrill’s task force was unavailable, Wilkinson assigned Moosbrugger’s six destroyers the job of stopping this reinforcement.

For a year frustrated destroyermen had rhetorically asked themselves “When are they going to cut us loose from the cruisers’ apron strings?”¹⁵ Not since the Asiatic Fleet’s World War I-era destroyers had attacked Japanese vessels in the Dutch East Indies in January and February 1942 had U.S. destroyers operated independently against the enemy. Since then they had spent their time escorting merchant ships, screening aircraft carrier task forces and protecting cruisers from their station in the battle line. But with no other forces available, American destroyers were finally going to have the opportunity to fight independently, an idea that Nimitz had suggested to Halsey following the heavy damage suffered by the cruisers in Kula Gulf.

¹⁵ Morison, Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier, 212.
Although the exact capabilities of Japan’s “Long Lance” torpedo were still unknown to the Americans, experience in the Solomons had demonstrated that the Japanese possessed a potent underwater weapon. Consequently, Wilkinson told Moosbrugger that the Japanese probably had superior torpedoes, but that our fire-control radars gave us an advantage in gunnery. He therefore recommended that Moosbrugger engage the enemy with long range gunfire.\footnote{Ibid., 213.} He then asked his new “Slot” commander how he intended to proceed. Fortunately, Moosbrugger was well-prepared to answer. Not only did his earlier conference with the motor torpedo boat commanders provide him with the necessary background information, but Commander Simpson had shown him Burke’s battle plan, which Moosbrugger had adopted as his own.\footnote{Roger Simpson, Letter to Arleigh Burke, August 28, 1943, 1, The Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO Files, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.} Having repeatedly practiced radar-directed nighttime torpedo attacks as the commander of Destroyer Division 12, Moosbrugger informed Wilkinson that he would not seek to subdue his opponent with long-range gunfire, but would instead conduct a two-pronged torpedo strike against him. He went on to explain his plan of action in detail.

Impressed with Moosbrugger’s proposals, Wilkinson abided by naval tradition and deferred to the judgment of the task force commander, telling him in effect “You know your ships better than I do; it’s up to you how to fight them.”\footnote{Morison, \textit{Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier}, 213.} Wilkinson’s only instructions were for Moosbrugger to take his ships to Vella Gulf west of the “Slot” (in the hope of avoiding aerial detection) and to pass through Gizo Strait (the southwestern
entrance to Vella Gulf) by 2200 in order to be sure to intercept the enemy if he comes
down tomorrow night.

The following morning Moosbrugger assembled his captains (and Commander
Simpson) aboard the Dunlap and explained the mission and battle plan. He would divide
his task group into two three-ship divisions, with himself in direct command of the first
group (A-1) and Simpson in command of the second (A-2). After transiting Gizo Strait,
the task group would proceed counterclockwise along the rim of the Vella Gulf to help
conceal it from the enemy and to maximize the utility of the American radar. The force
would steam in two columns, with A-2 positioned off A-1’s starboard quarter. Since two
of the four quadruple torpedo tube mounts had been removed from the ships of A-2 to
make room for two twin-40mm guns, A-2 would steam inboard, nearer the shoreline. If
Japanese barges were encountered, the quick-firing 40mm weapons would be brought to
bear against them. If enemy destroyers were detected, the outboard ships of A-1 (which
still had their full complement of torpedo tubes) would race toward a point approximately
6,000 yards and thirty degrees off the enemy’s bow, where a full broadside of torpedoes
would be launched. The A-1 ships would then turn away to avoid any possible enemy
torpedoes, followed by another turn to roughly parallel then enemy’s course. While this
was going on, the second division would come across the enemy’s bow and be prepared
to open with gunfire if the first division was spotted during its torpedo run. If it was not
detected, division A-2 would keep quiet until the torpedoes struck home. Depending on
the success of the first strike, division A-2 would either open with gunfire to finish off the
cripples or commence a torpedo attack of its own off the enemy’s opposite bow, which
would be covered by the gunfire of division A-1.\textsuperscript{19}

Since Moosbrugger’s captains had already been indoctrinated by Burke, this
conference merely reinforced and reiterated the plan of action. Thus, as the ships
departed Purvis Bay later that morning, every skipper knew what to expect if the enemy
were encountered.

Much was at stake on this mission. By leading the first independent destroyer
action in the Solomons campaign, Moosbrugger carried the burden of demonstrating the
capabilities of these ships when employed offensively. Success might lead to more
opportunities to hunt enemy task forces, while failure might result in a return to escorting
and screening duties.

If the “gun-club” admirals were wary of engaging Japanese task forces with
destroyers alone, they were even more concerned with Moosbrugger’s plan to split his
force into two groups. This violated the principle of concentration, a concept that had
been U.S. Navy dogma for half a century. In the Solomons, this policy had been
assiduously followed by American task force commanders following the disaster at the
Battle of Savo Island, when Mikawa had decimated a pair of separated Allied forces.

In another break with the past, Moosbrugger intended to employ the torpedo, not
the gun, as his primary weapon, despite the fact that his enemy was likely to be composed
of destroyers. Prewar U.S. Navy doctrine stated that under normal circumstances
destroyer torpedoes were to be reserved for use against capital ships or perhaps cruisers.
Hence task group commanders and captains in the Solomons campaign had usually

\textsuperscript{19} Frederick Moosbrugger, Destroyer Division 12 Action Report, August 16, 1943, Enclosure B,
Battle Plan, 4-9, Record Group 38, Box 628, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
husbanded their torpedoes for use against heavy targets. It may be recalled that on the night of November 14-15 Admiral Lee’s four destroyers all withheld their torpedoes against Kimura’s destroyer force, to the detriment of the former. At the Battle of Kula Gulf Ainsworth ordered his destroyers to open with gunfire because he wanted to save their torpedoes for use against the second group of enemy ships, which he believed to be composed of cruisers. (Ainsworth approved an early torpedo attack in the Battle of Kolombangara because a reconnaissance plane had informed him that a Japanese cruiser was present in the enemy column.) Although it was sensible to employ torpedoes against the larger enemy combatants, this policy often resulted in missed opportunities for American destroyermen. Recognizing this, Rear Admiral Tisdale, who had relieved Ainsworth as the Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet, in January 1943, had issued a new torpedo doctrine in February in which he had declared that all enemy vessels of destroyer size or larger were legitimate torpedo targets. Of course given Moosbrugger’s pre-battle assumption that “our primary and most devastating weapon is the torpedo,” it is likely that he (and Burke) would have planned to strike an enemy destroyer force with torpedoes even without Tisdale’s revision of doctrine.

Although the U.S. Navy had not had much luck with the Mark 15 in prior encounters, new developments made its prospective employment more favorable. First, in compliance with Nimitz’s order of July 24, ordnance men had deactivated the problematic magnetic influence exploder devices on all the torpedoes aboard Moosbrugger’s ships. Second, most of the torpedoes of Task Group 31.2 were equipped

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20 Tisdale, Destroyer Torpedo Doctrine, February 20, 1943, 3.

with 600 or 800 pound warheads. Although still not as deadly as their Japanese counterparts, the new warheads packed a more powerful punch than the original charges that weighed less than 500 pounds. Third, all of Task Group 31.2’s torpedo tubes had been recently equipped with flash hiders. By shielding the spark generated by the discharge of torpedoes from the tubes, the enemy would not be alerted to the impending underwater strike. Although the commander of the Pacific Fleet’s destroyer force had requested the installation of these devices in all his ships following a nighttime torpedo practice in 1941, limited quantities had prevented their availability in the South Pacific until now.  

Lastly, Moosbrugger had ordered torpedo depth settings to alternate between five feet (the minimum possible) and nine feet. His suspicions that the Mark 15’s were still running deeper than set had prompted him to disregard the regulations which stipulated settings of eight and twelve feet against destroyer targets (which typically drew 12-14 feet of water). The Executive Officer of the Maury, even more distrustful of the Mark 15’s depth regulator, convinced his captain to set all the torpedoes to run at five feet.

On the afternoon of August 6 Moosbrugger led his task group northward in the usual anti-aircraft circular disposition. At sunset crews went to General Quarters and the ships formed into a single column. Right on schedule, the vessels passed through Gizo Strait and entered the bottom of Vella Gulf at 2200. They then turned southeastwards to

22 M.F. Draemel, Comment in Report of Gunnery Exercises, U.S. Navy 1940-1941, Chapter 6, 61, Record Group 38, Box 61, National Archives II, College Park, MD.


24 Crenshaw, South Pacific Destroyer, 207-208.
search the small islands ringing the southern end of the gulf. The single column split into two, with the three ships of the second division forming off the starboard quarter of the first division. As they approached the mouth of Blackett Strait to the east, Moosbrugger turned his two columns due north to follow the western coast of Kolombangara.

With the moon having set at 2225 and the weather becoming squally, visibility dropped below 4,000 yards. Although several “Black Cat” flying boats had been sent ahead to reconnoiter the area, communication difficulties prevented the exchange of any information between Task Group 31.2 and the aerial observers. Moosbrugger, therefore would have to depend on his radar.

At 2318 the radar operator on flagship Dunlap registered a contact due east, toward nearby Kolombangara. Moosbrugger immediately radioed this finding to his task group and asked for confirmation. But none of the other ships had this “pip” on its radar scope. As the coast of Kolombangara bent away to the northeast, Moosbrugger increased speed to 25 knots and turned his ships to course 030, roughly paralleling the shoreline. The Dunlap’s radar operator reported that the contact was mimicking their movements, convincing Moosbrugger that the “pip” was a phantom caused by side radiation generated by the island and the three ships off his quarter.

At 2333 the Dunlap’s radarman picked up another possible “skunk,” this time to the north, approximately 24,000 yards away. The ship’s Combat Information Center determined that the contact was moving southwards at a speed of 25 knots. Moosbrugger announced this new discovery over the TBS circuit and asked the other ships if they had
The Battle of Vella Gulf
August 6-7, 1943

Vella Lavella Is.

Capt. Sugiura

Shigure

Cmdr. Moosbrugger (A-1)

Kolombangara

Vella Gulf

Cmdr. Simpson (A-2)

Blackett Strait

Map 11. The Battle of Vella Gulf
this contact. Less than a minute later the captain of the Craven replied “Affirmative. I have contact.” He also confirmed the target’s course and speed.

Within another minute the Dunlap’s Combat Information Center recommended a course of 335 degrees to reach the desired firing point off the enemy’s bow. Moosbrugger immediately radioed the new heading to his task group and ordered the ships of the first division to prepare to fire a full broadside of torpedoes to port. Simpson (in the destroyer Lang) subsequently led the second division westward, to come across the enemy’s bow and prepare to attack from the opposite side. The three ships of the first division, meanwhile, continued on to the north-northwest. By now the Dunlap’s radar showed four distinct “pips.” With data provided by the Combat Information Center, the flagship’s torpedo officer calculated a track angle of 290 degrees, which would allow the torpedoes to strike the enemy’s beam at a nearly perpendicular angle. At 2340, as the ranged dropped below 5,000 yards, Moosbrugger radioed “Execute 8 William 2” (fire eight torpedoes to port). With the enemy still unseen, eight Mark 15 torpedoes from each of A-1’s three ships began splashing into the water at three-second intervals, fanning out in two-degree spreads. In accordance with a normal fire distribution plan, rear-ship Maury aimed at the leading Japanese vessel, the Craven targeted the second ship in line and the Dunlap used the rear ship as its point of aim. Once the torpedoes were away, Moosbrugger signaled “Turn 9” (a simultaneous ninety degree turn to starboard). The Dunlap, Craven and Maury immediately turned eastwards, steaming three abreast and exposing only their sterns to a possible enemy counterstrike.25

25 Moosbrugger, Destroyer Division 12 Action Report, August 16, 1943, Enclosure C, 5-7; Clifton Iverson, USS Dunlap Action Report, August 18, 1943, Enclosure A, 2-6, 9-12, Record Group 38, Box 955, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
As he had done five nights previously, Captain Kaju Sugiura led the three ships of Destroyer Division 4 – *Hagikaze* (flagship), *Arashi* and *Kawakaze* – and the destroyer *Shigure* (the lone ship of Destroyer Division 27, led by Captain Tameichi Hara) on another supply run to Vila. Although warned by Hara to alter his approach or timetable from last week’s run, Sugiura chose to repeat his journey exactly as before. As the Japanese foursome turned south into Vella Gulf, Sugiura expected to encounter nothing more than harassing motor torpedo boats. Hara, on the other hand, was more concerned. None of the ships possessed a radar set and bad weather had prevented Japanese reconnaissance planes from reconnoitering the gulf and its approaches. And although he could see the reefs of Vella Lavella Island to the west, the view toward the much closer island of Kolombangara to the east was a dark void. As a precaution, Hara ordered the *Shigure*’s torpedo tubes trained outward to port. Much to his consternation, one of his port-side lookouts shouted the alarm – “White Waves! Black objects!” The ever-vigilant Hara immediately ordered a full starboard helm. During the forty-five seconds it took for the ship to fully respond, Hara ordered all eight of the ship’s torpedoes fired toward the enemy. As his ship loosed its “fish” and began to swing to the right, Hara noticed that the ships preceding him had not yet reacted. Before he could warn them, he saw explosions erupt on the *Arashi* and *Kawakaze*. (He could not see the flagship, which was too far away and blocked from his line of sight by the other two.) As the *Shigure* heeled to starboard, Hara spotted torpedoes approaching. The first missed ahead by twenty yards, the second missed by a narrower margin and the third seemed destined to hit, but did not. (Hara speculated that it only grazed his ship or was a dud.) There was also a “thud” abaft, but, again, no explosion. (When the ship later went into dry dock, there was
a hole in the rudder nearly two feet across, indicating that a torpedo had punched right through it, but had failed to detonate.) As the Shigure completed its countermarch, Hara ordered the ship to generate a smokescreen and retire.26

The four-minute wait for the U.S. torpedoes to complete their journey had been unbearable for the topside sailors of Moosbrugger’s first division. Their anxiety was met with relief when they began to see and hear multiple explosions in the distance. When they had pulled approximately 10,000 yards away from their adversary, Moosbrugger ordered a simultaneous turn to the south, putting his three ships back into column, with the Maury now in the lead. He then ordered his ships to commence gunfire. As had happened previously, the furious firing caused each ship’s radar to cease functioning temporarily. But they were brought back into operation relatively quickly.

Meanwhile, the ships of the second division had been steaming across the enemy’s “T” with their radar-directed guns trained on their quarry, waiting for the first division’s torpedoes to complete their run. Once they began exploding against the Japanese hulls, Simpson ordered his ships to fire. Although rear-ship Shigure had survived the torpedo strike and was retreating to the north, the three leading Japanese destroyers had all been hit by one or more torpedoes, crippling them at the outset. Simpson’s (and Moosbrugger’s) gunfire added to the carnage. As a precaution, Simpson also ordered each of his ships to fire a pair of torpedoes at what appeared to be a wounded cruiser.

Fearing that the “Tokyo Express” might be divided into two groups, as had sometimes been the case in the past, Moosbrugger led his first division to the north to

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26 Hara, Japanese Destroyer Captain, 177-181.
hunt for a possible second enemy force while Simpson stayed behind and completed the
destruction of the flaming vessels in the gulf. When he found the area clear,
Moosbrugger led his three ships down the “Slot,” with Simpson following shortly
thereafter. Upon his return to Purvis Bay, Moosbrugger reported that his unscathed task
group had sunk the entire enemy force of three destroyers and one cruiser. In actuality he
had only sunk three destroyers, but this still exceeded the tally of any previous U.S. task
force in the Solomons. And of the 700 sailors and 820 soldiers embarked on these
vessels, only 310 were eventually rescued.27

**Assessment of the Battle**

A famous military axiom states that no battle plan survives contact with the
e Lyme. However, Task Group 31.2 challenged the validity of this adage by executing its
attack almost exactly according to plan. The captain of the *Craven*, Lieutenant
Commander F.T. Williamson, stated that the engagement was “just like a drill,” while the
*Dunlap*’s skipper wrote that the attack was “almost a duplicate of our radar torpedo
practice.”28 To be sure, the American performance was not flawless. The overhead
“Black Cats” failed to establish communication with Task Group 31.2, the *Dunlap* spent
a considerable amount of time tracking a false contact, and, as had happened previously,
the SG radars on several ships became inoperable due to the shock of gunfire. But these
minor setbacks proved insignificant to the outcome of the battle.

Far more important was the fact that an independently-operated U.S. destroyer
force had carried out a deadly torpedo attack, thereby demonstrating the hitting power of

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[27] Ibid., 180.

these warships when properly employed. The Craven’s Williamson concluded afterwards that “our destroyer doctrine is sound…providing we use destroyers offensively and not for the protection of cruisers and battleships, as they have been used in the past.”

The captain of the Maury, Commander Gelzer Sims, wrote that for too long destroyers have been used to simply extend the cruiser line. Such an elongated column, he wrote, was almost certain to sustain torpedo damage, even if the enemy missiles were poorly aimed. On the other hand, he stated that the compact and agile destroyer columns of Task Group 31.2 presented a difficult target for enemy torpedo fire. In his Battle Experience bulletin issued in December, King agreed with this assessment, noting that Japanese torpedoes had wreaked havoc against lengthy U.S. columns steaming on steady courses.

Surprise was also a major reason for this American success. Various skippers speculated that their close proximity to the coast of Kolombangara had hid Task Group 31.2 from both visual and radar detection. They also praised the effectiveness of their flashless powder and new flash eliminators on the torpedo tubes, which aided their concealment and (in the case of the former) reduced the blinding effect on their own eyes.

In addition, Moosbrugger’s captains pointed to the growing effectiveness of the Combat Information Centers as a factor in their success. Williamson stated that “what might have otherwise been a confusing series of reports and orders became a coordinated

29 Ibid., 6.

30 Gelzer Sims, USS Maury Action Report, August 15, 1943, 9, Record Group 38, Box 1230, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

31 Ernest King, Battle Experience, Naval Operations Solomon Islands Area, July 12-August 10, 1943, December 6, 1943, Chapter 58, 17, Record Group 334, Box 444, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
flow of evaluated information because of C.I.C.”32 Simpson stated that the C.I.C. “is the 
most important activity on the ship.”33 The versatility of these control centers was such 
that the captain of the Maury directed it to conn the ship (by radar) when visibility 
became particularly poor.

Despite the generally smooth flow of information emanating from the C.I.C., 
there was still no substitute for a visual check of the SG radar scope to provide a clear 
picture of the tactical situation. Moosbrugger journeyed down one deck to the C.I.C. on 
several occasions during the battle to have a look at the luminous images for himself. 
Because the Lang’s C.I.C. was situated in the pilot house (adjacent to the bridge), 
Simpson checked the radar scope more frequently, about once a minute throughout the 
engagement.34 These periodic observations of the radar screens enabled Moosbrugger 
and Simpson to coordinate their activities against the enemy and maneuver accordingly. 
Not only did they strike the enemy in succession as planned, but no instances of friendly 
fire developed nor did the engagement deteriorate into a mêlée.

In addition to the exploitation of radar, much of the reason for the nearly flawless 
execution of the battle plan was due to the proper indoctrination of the captains of Task 
Force 31.2. In past actions U.S. warships were frequently assembled and sent into battle 
with the captains unsure of the commanding officer’s intentions. But prior to the Vella 
Gulf action Moosbrugger made sure that his skippers knew what to expect. After the 
battle he commented that “mutual understanding between commanders and commanding

32 Williamson, Craven Action Report, August 8, 1943, 6.
33 Roger Simpson, quoted in Battle Experience, December 6, 1943, Chapter 58, 26.
34 Roger Simpson, Destroyer Division 15 Action Report, August 12, 1943, 3, Record Group 38, 
Box 629, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
officers is requisite to complete and coordinated destruction of the enemy.”

Similarly, Simpson stated that “the complete understanding of all possible situations to be encountered by the division commanders and commanding officers is largely responsible for the success achieved.”

King agreed, writing that “there is no substitute for frequent personal conferences and free discussions.”

In a similar vein, Admiral Wilkinson noted that this action illustrated the results that can be achieved by destroyer groups when they are given the opportunity to train as a unit. Halsey and Nimitz, of course, had discussed the need for proper division and squadron training for the destroyers in early 1943, but only recently had the availability of destroyers been sufficient allow this to take place.

No one was more pleased with the outcome of this battle than Moosbrugger, who took pride in demonstrating the lethality of the hitherto under-appreciated U.S. destroyer forces. In a jab at the “gun-club” mentality of the navy, he wrote that “a successful torpedo attack is devastating to the enemy.” Lest there be any doubt as to the ability of American destroyers to deliver such a blow, he stated that “our destroyer doctrine is sound” and “our present torpedoes are effective and can be counted on to run true, hit, and explode.” In his exuberance, Moosbrugger claimed American torpedo fire to be “equal to or better than that of the enemy.”

Convinced that the torpedo was the most deadly weapon in a nighttime engagement, Moosbrugger attempted to convince the “gun club” admirals that destroyers

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35 Moosbrugger, Destroyer Division 12 Action Report, August 16, 1943, Enclosure C, 12.
36 Simpson, Destroyer Division 15 Action Report, August 12, 1943, 7.
37 King, Battle Experience, December 6, 1943, Chapter 58, 3.
38 Moosbrugger, Destroyer Division 12 Action Report, August 16, 1943, Enclosure C, 12.
should be assigned the primary attack role. He recommended that when cruisers and destroyers operated together, the latter should serve as the principal strike unit, with the former employed as the supporting or “covering force.” Such a proposal, of course, ran counter to recent U.S. Navy practice, which made the ships with the biggest guns the centerpiece of the battle.

Moosbrugger’s advice nevertheless found a receptive audience with Admiral Wilkinson at Guadalcanal. In his endorsement of the Battle of Vella Gulf, he pointed out that U.S. task forces had typically assumed a “miniature fleet disposition,” with destroyers in the van and rear of the cruiser line. But such a formation, said Wilkinson, precluded the ability of the destroyers to employ their primary weapon – the torpedo, except against targets of opportunity. As he saw it, this battle demonstrated the utility of destroyers as torpedo carriers, “a value which has been somewhat neglected in recent years, with the attention concentrated on the gun power.” The action in Vella Gulf convinced Wilkinson to support Moosbrugger’s suggestion to make destroyers the primary attack unit. Wilkinson wrote that henceforth, destroyers should be in the forefront of a task force in order to be well-placed to conduct an immediate torpedo attack, with the rearward cruisers providing gunfire support after the torpedoes were given a chance to hit.

It is somewhat ironic that Nimitz, who had been criticizing the destroyers’ underachievements since the Battle of Cape Esperance in October 1942, was hesitant to embrace Moosbrugger’s tactics. To be sure, the Pacific Fleet’s Commander in Chief was

39 Ibid.

40 Theodore Wilkinson, First Endorsement to Commander Destroyer Division 12, September 3, 1943, 3, Record Group 38, Box 73, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
pleased with the results of the battle (even though the testimony of prisoners captured on Vella Lavella later revealed that there had been no Japanese cruiser present and that Moosbrugger had sunk only three of the four enemy ships). He also praised Moosbrugger for withholding his torpedo fire until he had a nearly perfect set-up at close range and for delaying the opening of gunfire until the torpedoes had been given the opportunity to score. But he was uncomfortable with Moosbrugger’s division of his force. This violated the principle of concentration, a tenet considered sacrosanct by American commanders since Mahan made it the cornerstone of U.S. naval strategy in the late 19th century.

Because he believed that luck played a major part in the victory, Nimitz was reluctant to immediately endorse Moosbrugger’s methods. He wrote that one of the weaknesses of most tactical analysis is the strong tendency to work backward from the result, and in the light of after-knowledge, to applaud all tactics that accompanied success while condemning whatever was associated with losses or failure; in either case to the exclusion of the element of chance which may actually have had a controlling influence.41

Nimitz conceded that a divided force was less vulnerable to a devastating enemy blow at the outset, such as a well-placed torpedo spread. A divided force also had the potential to surprise an enemy preoccupied with an attack coming from another direction. Lastly, multiple attack groups could generate a crisscross pattern of torpedoes that made it more difficult for the enemy to turn away from the danger.

On the other hand, Nimitz wrote that each half (or portion) of a divided force risked being overpowered by the might of a unified enemy. The first attack of a split force was also less potent. Nimitz noted that if all six of Moosbrugger’s destroyers had

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41 Chester Nimitz, Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – August 1943, November 20, 1943, Annex C, 185, Record Group 334, Box 367, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
partaken in the initial torpedo attack, it might not have been necessary to finish off the
eady with gunfire and subsequent torpedoes. Thus, Nimitz concluded that “there is no
magic in separation… and its success in this battle of 6-7 August should not lead to its
indiscriminate acceptance as an infallible (sic) key to victory.” 42

Perhaps remembering how American task force commanders had mimicked the
tactics used by Admiral Scott at the Battle of Cape Esperance without realizing the
extenuating circumstances inherent in that victory, Nimitz was wise to caution his
officers to be wary of assuming that Moosbrugger’s methods were applicable in every
situation. But his reluctance to endorse a division of forces for destroyer units is difficult
to understand. Not only was this an accepted feature of prewar destroyer doctrine, but it
was a component of Nimitz’s own “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack” (Tactical
Bulletin 5TB-42) doctrine issued in November 1942. It stated that the ideal torpedo
attack was for a destroyer squadron to divide into three three-ship divisions, followed by
strikes from “widely separated sectors.” 43 For whatever reason, Nimitz was now
reluctant to sanction this tactic after it had been proven in battle.

Halsey, on the other hand, endorsed Moosbrugger’s actions without reservation.
Although news of Moosbrugger’s tactics quickly spread among destroyermen via officer
club and wardroom discussions, Halsey wanted to make sure that all his commanders
were informed about what had transpired in Vella Gulf. Rather than wait for Nimitz’s
and King’s reports to be compiled in several months’ time, Halsey disseminated the

42 Ibid., Annex C 184.

43 Nimitz, Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5TB-42, November 14, 1942, 4; Commander
Destroyers, Battle Force, Current Doctrine, Destroyers, 1940, 15.
details of the battle to his officers shortly after Moosbrugger submitted his report of the encounter on August 16.\textsuperscript{44}

Rear Admiral Tisdale, the Pacific Fleet’s commander of destroyers, also fully approved of Moosbrugger’s tactics. Impressed with the ingenuity of the battle plan and results achieved by Task Group 31.2 in Vella Gulf, he distributed a special bulletin to the fleet’s destroyer forces (with copies sent to the other Pacific commands) on November 8. This communiqué, which he ordered to be added to his most recently issued destroyer tactical bulletin as “Appendix A,” was a reprint of the Burke/Moosbrugger battle plan. Tisdale entitled the document “Night Destroyer Attack Plan” and stated that it had been derived from actual combat experience in the South Pacific.\textsuperscript{45} Tisdale’s imprimatur thus gave the Burke/Moosbrugger tactics added authority throughout the Pacific Fleet.

King added his commendations to the chorus of laudations. He praised the battle plan as “splendid” and “thoroughly sound.” And he was delighted with the execution of the torpedo attack. In his analysis of the October 1942 Battle of Cape Esperance, King had questioned why Scott had not formed his destroyers into strike groups to attack the enemy in the flank with torpedoes. Not only had Moosbrugger finally undertaken such an action, but he had done it expeditiously. King noted that only seven minutes had elapsed between the time the enemy was detected and the moment Moosbrugger ordered torpedoes to be fired. This “outstanding performance,” he said, stood in sharp contrast to past actions that had involved much longer intervals between detection and the commencement of fire.

\textsuperscript{44} Potter, \textit{Admiral Arleigh Burke}, 84.

\textsuperscript{45} Mahlon Tisdale, Night Destroyer Attack Plan (Appendix A to D.T.B. 4-43), November 8, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 130, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
King was also pleased with the lack of confusion in this battle. At the Battle of Cape Esperance, for example, Scott had become unsure of the whereabouts of both the enemy and parts of his own force. On the night of November 12-13, general chaos ensued. In his critique of these actions, King wrote that it was doubtful that either Scott or Callaghan had a clear idea of the tactical situation.\textsuperscript{46} Such disorder, however, was absent in Vella Gulf. King wrote that Moosbrugger “demonstrated a complete grasp of the situation continuously and acted promptly in conformance with his battle plan.” With Simpson’s help, the two destroyer divisions achieved “perfect coordination,” resulting in the decimation of the enemy force. King’s only significant criticism was the failure of the “Black Cat” reconnaissance planes to alert Task Group 31.2 of the approaching Japanese ships. To fix this problem, King called for the initiation of nighttime practices in warship-aircraft cooperation and the inclusion of the scouting pilots in the pre-battle conferences.\textsuperscript{47}

Moosbrugger received many accolades for his victory in Vella Gulf. Among his congratulators was a gracious Arleigh Burke. Although he was heartbroken that he had not been able to lead the task group into battle himself, Burke nevertheless praised his successor for his execution of one of the “most successful actions ever fought.”\textsuperscript{48} Burke sent a similar letter of praise to Roger Simpson, prompting the latter to inform his old boss what he already suspected – that Moosbrugger had used Burke’s battle plan “almost

\textsuperscript{46} King, Battle Experience, March 15, 1943, Chapter 20, 10; King, Battle Experience, March 25, 1943, Chapter 28, 15.

\textsuperscript{47} King, Battle Experience, December 6, 1943, Chapter 58, 8, 14.

\textsuperscript{48} Arleigh Burke, Letter to Frederick Moosbrugger, August 9, 1943, 1, The Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO Files, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
verbatim.”\textsuperscript{49} This knowledge only served to increase Burke’s desire to obtain another fighting assignment. For the time being, however, he was stuck escorting supply ships to Guadalcanal.

**Japanese Retreat from the Central Solomons**

In addition to their victory in Vella Gulf, the Americans finally captured the Munda airfield on August 4. Construction crews immediately went to work to repair and upgrade the runway for American use. The remaining Japanese troops conducted a fighting withdrawal to the north, eventually evacuating to Vila by barge across Kula Gulf on August 24.

In a year’s worth of fierce campaigning in the Solomons, American forces had advanced only 200 miles toward Japan. Such a slow rate of progress could not continue if the United States wished to get to Tokyo before its people grew weary of the war. Therefore in early July Nimitz suggested that Halsey “leapfrog” over Kolombangara and land on the virtually unoccupied island of Vella Lavella instead. The Japanese, of course, were expecting the Americans to invade Kolombangara in order to capture its airfield.

To defend the island, the Japanese began sending small barges with troops and supplies to Vila. Because American air strikes and the defeat in Vella Gulf had attrited the destroyer force of Japan’s 8th Fleet to dangerously low levels, Admiral Kusaka in Rabaul decided to rely on barges to move the bulk of his men and supplies in the Solomons. These small shallow-draft vessels – typically 40-50 feet long and capable of about 8 knots – could carry 100-120 men or 10-15 tons of cargo.\textsuperscript{50} To avoid detection,

\textsuperscript{49} Roger Simpson, Letter to Arleigh Burke, August 28, 1943, 1, The Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO Files, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.

\textsuperscript{50} Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, 208.
they traveled along the island coasts by night and hid in small coves by day. Although
destroyers would sometimes accompany these barges during the final leg of their journey,
on some occasions they would be escorted by motor torpedo boats and submarine chasers
only.

The Japanese defensive plan was discomfited by the unexpected American
landing on the southern end of Vella Lavella Island on August 15. Lacking the shipping
resources to transport a force capable of driving the American invaders off the island, the
Japanese instead decided to land a small contingent of men on the northeastern end of the
island at Horaniu to secure a staging point for their barges.

On the morning of August 17 thirteen barges and some motor torpedo boats and
submarine chasers departed from Buin on Bougainville Island with two army companies
and a navy platoon aboard. Earlier that morning four destroyers under the command of
Rear Admiral Matsuji Ijuin sortied from Rabaul, intending to rendezvous with this
transport group. The destroyers caught up with the barges in the “Slot” and steamed
ahead to search for enemy warships. As the dark loom of Kolombangara appeared in the
distance, Ijuin decided to avoid a possible American trap and rejoin the transport craft.

From the south approached the four ships of Captain Thomas Ryan’s Destroyer
Division 41.51 Several hours earlier, an American TBF Avenger bomber had informed
him that four Japanese destroyers and numerous barges were in the “Slot” heading
toward Vella Lavella. Ryan raced toward his quarry under an unusually clear nighttime
sky. And with a nearly full moon shining, visibility was 16,000 yards or more.

51 Captain Thomas Ryan had replaced Moosbrugger as the new commander of Task Group 31.2
(Commander Destroyers, Slot).
Ryan’s battle doctrine was based on the plans worked out by his predecessors. He intended to keep his guns quiet while he snuck up on his enemy. He would then fire his torpedoes using radar solutions, followed by a temporarily retirement to avoid any possible enemy torpedoes. The crippled enemy force would then be finished off with gunfire.\(^{52}\)

American radar scopes detected the Japanese to the northwest at a range of 20,000 yards. The high visibility, however, spoiled any chance for Ryan to take his enemy by surprise. Japanese reconnaissance aircraft spotted his column and dropped flares around it. Alerted, Ijuin’s lookouts spotted the approaching American destroyers 16,000 yards away to the southeast. The two forces were on nearly parallel westerly courses, with the Japanese favorably positioned off Ryan’s starboard bow. Exploiting their tactical advantage, the Japanese fired a spread of torpedoes into the expected path of the Americans and commenced gunfire. Fortuitously, Ryan turned his column to the northwest to get close enough to fire his short-winded Mark 15s, thereby avoiding the torpedo water to the west. When he brought his column back to a westerly heading, Ijuin led his destroyers southwards, thereby capping Ryan’s “T.” To extricate himself from this position, Ryan swung his destroyers northwards, on the opposite course of his opponent. With the Japanese still beyond American torpedo range, the U.S. ships replied with radar-directed gunfire. The Japanese, however, fired more torpedoes across the Americans’ path. When these “fish” arrived, Ryan’s destroyers had to undertake radical maneuvering to avoid them. Following these underwater salvoes, the Japanese retired, leaving the barges to their fate.

\(^{52}\) Thomas Ryan, Destroyer Squadron Twenty-one Action Report, September 2, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 910, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
Unable to catch the Japanese destroyers, Ryan turned his vessels to the south to destroy the transport group. But by now the barges had scattered and were scurrying toward the safety of the Vella Lavella coast. Although Ryan’s ships destroyed some of these craft, most escaped. Even some of those brought under fire managed to reach their destination. As the Americans discovered, small barges were not easy to destroy. These maneuvering craft were difficult to strike with the five-inch guns, which one historian said was like trying to shoot cockroaches with a pistol. Additionally, the armor plate affixed to the sides of the barges tended to defeat the destroyers’ automatic weapons fire. Consequently, American barge-busting efforts proved relatively ineffective.

Overall, Ryan was fortunate to return to Purvis Bay with his force intact and undamaged. His failure to anticipate enemy torpedo fire nearly cost him. But he had handled his task group well, which Wilkinson attributed to the fact that his force was a cohesive unit accustomed to working as a together as a team. As far as the admiral was concerned, this was another demonstration of the need to maintain the integrity of destroyer divisions.

With the American landing on Vella Lavella and completion of an airfield on September 24, the Japanese garrison on Kolombangara found itself outflanked. Rather than leave these troops to their fate, the Japanese commanders at Rabaul decided to retrieve them. The soldiers were directed to make their way to the northern tip of the island. At the end of September the Japanese began the evacuation of these men via nightly barge and destroyer runs. American attempts to prevent this proved ineffective.

53 Morison, _Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier_, 222.

54 Theodore Wilkinson, Second Endorsement to Destroyer Division 41 Action, October 4, 1943, Record Group 38, Box 1277, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
Troop-carrying destroyers used speed to elude their pursuers while the barges dispersed when confronted by U.S. warships. By October 4 the Japanese had extracted 9,400 men, losing only about one-third of their barges and less than a thousand men in these operations. This left only their garrison in Choiseul and the 589 men on Vella Lavella in the central Solomons. There was no urgency in removing the former group. But the men on Vella Lavella had retreated to the northwestern tip of the island and required immediate evacuation if they were to be saved from the American ground troops converging on their position at Marquana Bay. This rescue effort on October 6 provoked a destroyer clash known as the Battle of Vella Lavella.

**The Battle of Vella Lavella**

In order to prevent an ignominious defeat on Vella Lavella, 8th Fleet commander Admiral Samejima ordered Ijuin to withdraw the 589 men on the island. The latter assembled an uncharacteristically strong force to conduct the operation. To convey the troops, he gathered a collection of submarine chasers, motor torpedo boats and barges, with three destroyer-transports as an escort. To screen this unit, Ijuin would lead the four available destroyers of his Destroyer Squadron 3 and the two destroyers of Captain Hara’s Destroyer Division 27. On the morning of October 6 the nine Japanese destroyers left Rabaul and proceeded toward the “Slot.” Later that day, the evacuation vessels left Buin (at the southern end of Bougainville Island) and steamed southwards at a slow 9 knots. As Ijuin’s destroyers passed by Bougainville, he ordered the three destroyer-transports and Hara’s two destroyers to join the transport group while he raced ahead with his four destroyers.

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Allied reconnaissance planes had spotted the two Japanese forces soon after they had departed from their respective bases. When Admiral Wilkinson on Guadalcanal received the news that nine enemy destroyers and a barge fleet were heading south, he correctly deduced that they were on their way to Vella Lavella to evacuate its trapped garrison. Unfortunately, this Japanese operation caught him with few available naval forces. Wilkinson sent a dispatch to Task Group 31.2 commander Captain Frank Walker, presently leading destroyers Selfridge, Chevalier and O’Bannon homeward after a sweep up the “Slot” the previous night. He ordered them to reverse course and proceed to a point northwest of Vella Lavella to intercept the enemy. To supplement Walker’s force, Wilkinson also ordered the three destroyers under Captain Harold Larson to abandon their escort mission and race northward to meet Walker off Vella Lavella before the Japanese arrived. However, because Larson’s trio was farther to the south than Walker’s task group, the former would not be able to reach the rendezvous point until about 2330.

As Walker led his three destroyers up the “Slot” that evening, Wilkinson radioed him to expect up to nine enemy destroyers to be screening the evacuation force. Aware that Larson’s group would probably be late to arrive, Walker realized that he might have to engage an enemy three times his size. Moreover, this was only his second day sailing with the Chevalier and O’Bannon, both of which belonged to another destroyer squadron. This quick assembly of ships the prior day permitted only a five-minute conference among the commanders. Also disconcerting was the fact that enemy “snooper” planes had located his force and were tracking his progress up the “Slot” by dropping multicolored flares and float lights around his ships. On the other hand, the “Black Cats”
assigned to provide real-time information to the American task force commander failed yet again to establish communication with him.

As Ijuin approached the northwestern coast of Vella Lavella, he spotted what appeared to be four enemy destroyers silhouetted against the glow of aerial flares to the east. But they quickly disappeared from sight when they passed into a rain squall. A moment later a Japanese scout pilot erroneously reported that the American force north of Vella Lavella consisted of four cruisers and three destroyers. In light of this powerful threat, Ijuin ordered the three destroyer-transports (but not the evacuation force) to retire and told Hara join him as soon as possible. In the meantime, Ijuin changed his course to the north to hasten his union with Destroyer Division 27.

At 2231 the SG radar scopes on the three U.S. destroyers detected Ijuin’s and Hara’s forces to the west and west-northwest, respectively. Three minutes later Walker’s lookouts spotted Ijuin’s force 15,000 yards away. Perhaps due to their expectation of encountering nine enemy warships, lookouts and radarmen determined that the nearer group consisted of five ships (with one possibly a cruiser) and the other composed of four ships. Walker attempted to raise Larson’s group approaching from the south (i.e., west of the “Slot”) on the TBS circuit. But, as expected, Larson was beyond the reach of this short-ranged frequency. Realizing that the element of surprise had been lost and believing that his force was outnumbered nine-to-three (rather than the actual six-to-three), Walker nevertheless decided to attack. A sailor in the Chevalier recalled that “we were going in…though it looked like a suicide mission. (Those) Navy skippers were fire-

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56 Hara, *Japanese Destroyer Captain*, 204.
Map 12. The Battle of Vella Lavella

The Battle of Vella Lavella
October 6-7, 1943

Capt. Hans

Selfridge hit

Chevolier

Capt. Walker

To Manusima Bay

Yagurwo

Adm. Ijimn
eaters. They wouldn’t back down in the face of the whole Jap fleet, regardless of the odds.”

When the Japanese lookouts spotted the U.S. ships again, Ijuin led his four destroyers westward, eventually bending onto a southerly heading. About five miles to the north Hara’s two destroyers were racing southwards to join the pending engagement. Although Ijuin brought his four ships across Walker’s bow in a classic capping of the “T,” the Japanese commander did not open fire on his enemy, which he still believed to be composed of cruisers. Probably to distract his enemy from the evacuation force to the north and to set up a torpedo attack, Ijuin ordered a simultaneous turn to port, putting his ships in a line-of-bearing (i.e., off the quarter of the one in front) to the east-southeast at 2251.

Outnumbered, Walker’s original intention was to parallel his enemy’s southerly course and draw him into the guns and torpedo tubes of Larson’s northbound group. But Ijuin’s sudden turn to the east-southeast changed that. Stationed in the Combat Information Center (which, on the Selfridge, was on the same deck as the bridge), Walker immediately recognized that his opponent’s maneuver presented him with an opportunity to launch a torpedo attack against him. Walker bore his column to starboard, putting it on a roughly opposite course of his enemy. With the enemy 7,000 yards off his port bow and closing, Walker ordered his ships to prepare to fire a half salvo of torpedoes. The Combat Information Centers aboard each ship quickly supplied the necessary data on the enemy to the torpedo officers, who then calculated the torpedo solutions. At the

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recommendation of an embarked member of the staff of the Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet, Walker had ordered the torpedo depth settings to be staggered between five and seven feet, virtually eliminating any chance that these weapons would pass underneath their targets. At 2256 Walker signaled his task group to fire torpedoes.

Since surprise had been lost and the enemy was plainly visible, Walker ordered his ships to open fire after the fifteen torpedoes were away. With good visibility and the low moon silhouetting the Japanese ships, lead-ship *Selfridge* struck rear ship *Yugumo* (its normal target) at least five times with five-inch shells. The Japanese vessel wheeled left and launched eight torpedoes of its own before staggering to the southwest. But before it could get away one (or perhaps more) Mark 15 slammed into its hull, causing a tremendous explosion that sank the ship in seven minutes.

Ijuin had erred. Although he had successfully drawn the enemy’s attention to him, his line-of-bearing formation masked the torpedo batteries of his vessels, except for the outboard *Yugumo*. Even the gunfire of his ships was sporadic due to the gunners’ fears of hitting their comrades off their port quarter. To extricate himself from this disadvantage, Ijuin led his ships (except *Yugumo*) in a turn to the south, followed by another to the west, taking them beyond American torpedo range.

In contrast to Ijuin’s tactical blunder, Walker had maneuvered his ships into a favorable position for his guns and torpedoes. Unfortunately, this seasoned destroyer squadron commander neglected to guard against the enemy’s torpedo attack. Fixated on keeping his guns bearing on the enemy, Walker maintained his westerly heading, albeit with a shallow zigzag. But the minor course changes were insufficient to avoid the *Yugumo*’s torpedo water. At 2301 a “Long Lance” struck the *Chevalier*. The explosion
detonated a gun magazine, blowing off the ship’s bow as far back as the bridge. The ship drifted to the right and came to a stop. The trailing O’Bannon rammed into the Chevalier’s starboard quarter, damaging the former’s bow.

Meanwhile, Hara’s two ships arrived from the north and crossed ahead of the Selfridge. Intent on setting up a torpedo attack, Hara led the pair in a sharp turn to the northwest, roughly paralleling Walker’s flagship. Slightly ahead of his opponent, Hara ordered a full salvo of torpedoes fired across the path of the lone American destroyer at 2301. His ships then opened with gunfire, but these shells never came close to the American flagship.

With Ijuin’s ships pulling away, Walker shifted his attention to the two Japanese destroyers off his port bow. Since they were too far away to be reached by his torpedoes, he bore his ship to the northwest to better unmask his guns and commenced firing at 2304. The American shells began straddling the Shigure almost at once. But before they could score, one of Hara’s torpedoes hit the Selfridge on the port side, blowing off a chunk of its bow. No fires resulted and the amputated portion was less than that lost by the Chevalier, allowing the flagship to limp away to the east.

Although Ijuin’s three remaining ships still had not fired their torpedoes, he decided to order a retirement when one of his aerial scouts reported another American force approaching from the south. This was Larson’s three destroyers, which arrived just fifteen minutes after Ijuin and Hara had withdrawn. They searched for the enemy destroyers and barge fleet, but found neither. They therefore returned to the scene of battle to succor their wounded comrades.
The *O'Bannon*’s self-inflicted injuries were modest. And despite the loss of its bow from a “Long Lance,” the *Selfridge* was able to retire at 10 knots. The *Chevalier*, however, could not be saved, despite the absence of any fires. After its crew transferred to the *O’Bannon*, one of Larson’s destroyers dispatched it with a single torpedo (an indication of the improved reliability of the Mark 15).

Preoccupied with their rescue operations, the Americans missed the subsequent arrival of the Japanese evacuation force. It reached Vella Lavella, embarked all 589 men and conveyed them safely to Bougainville.

**Assessment of the Battle**

Since the Japanese accomplished their rescue mission and inflicted greater damage against their opponent, the Battle of Vella Lavella was an undeniable triumph for the Imperial Navy. Walker, however, saw it as an American victory since he believed that his task group had prevented the evacuation attempt and sunk a minimum of three enemy destroyers in the process.58 Wilkinson and Halsey agreed – the latter’s chief of staff writing that the encounter was a “heroically and successfully fought action,” with “severe damage inflicted upon the enemy in spite of the almost prohibitive odds of three to one.”59 Walker even saw fit to disparage his adversary’s supposed superiority in torpedo fire. He wrote that this reputation is undeserved since the enemy scored only one hit against his force during the first phase of the action, despite an ideal firing angle.60

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58 Frank Walker, Destroyer Squadron 4 Action Report, October 26, 1943, 2, Record Group 38, Box 33, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

59 Robert Carney, Second Endorsement on Destroyer Squadron 4 Action Report, December 5, 1943, 1, Record Group 38, Box 33, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

60 Walker, Destroyer Squadron 4 Action Report, October 26, 1943, 3.
Having noted Japan’s prowess in torpedo warfare throughout the Solomon’s campaign, Nimitz was less dismissive of his enemy’s capabilities in this regard. Still, he was baffled as to why so few Japanese torpedoes were seen in the initial phase of the battle, when both sides had excellent firing opportunities. (Neither Nimitz nor Walker realized that Ijuin’s echeloned formation prevented all but one of his ships from launching torpedoes.) In light of past experiences, Nimitz doubted that Walker’s gunfire prevented the enemy from effectively retaliating with its favorite weapon.61 After all, if the forty-five rapid-firing six-inch guns of Ainsworth’s cruisers had not been able to suppress the enemy’s torpedo fire in Kula Gulf, it was virtually certain that the eighteen five-inch guns of Walker’s destroyers did not.

One thing Nimitz was sure of, however, was Walker’s failure to take evasive action after firing his torpedoes. Until recently most of the U.S. Navy’s senior commanders had been stymied over how to prevent torpedo damage. The severe underwater injuries suffered by Admiral Wright’s task force at the Battle of Tassafaronga had led to the speculation that the Japanese were employing submarines in conjunction with their surface forces, a supposition supported by Halsey and King. To protect against surface or subsurface torpedo attacks, King recommended higher battle speeds (which was not effective) while Nimitz advocated engaging at distances beyond torpedo range (which was not possible). It was only after Burke had devised the tactic of turning away after firing torpedoes and Moosbrugger had carried it out at the Battle of Vella Gulf in August that the U.S. Navy found the antidote to this menace. (It must be remembered that Ainsworth’s countermarches were not designed to avoid enemy torpedoes, but to

61 Chester Nimitz, Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – October 1943, January 18, 1944, Annex C, 1-2, Record Group 334, Box 367, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
keep his guns bearing on the target. Nimitz’s comments on these maneuvers, which he falsely attributed as defensive measures, were written in October – two months after Moosbrugger had demonstrated the effectiveness of this tactic.)

Armed with this new doctrine, Nimitz and King both pointed out Walker’s failure to comply with it. The former wrote that the shallow zigzag Walker conducted during the action was hardly adequate to avoid the enemy’s torpedo water in the first phase. Nimitz added that

Considering the short range, the good target angle he presented, and the number of enemy ships opposing him, Commander Task Group 31.2 might very easily have had all three of his ships blown out of the water at this time instead of receiving but one hit. There was no reason to expect that the enemy’s torpedo fire would be feeble, or that a full, well-aimed salvo would not be on its way thru the water at the same time as his own.62

In light of this, Nimitz wrote that commanders must not wait for enemy torpedoes to be spotted in the water before implementing evasive maneuvers. U.S. commanders must assume that enemy would fire accurate spreads of torpedoes at his first opportunity, and act accordingly. Although Walker expressed no regrets over his actions, the same was not true for the captain of the sunken Chevalier. In words that betrayed his remorse for his task group’s disregard of the Burke/Moosbrugger doctrine, he wrote that “we should have turned away at least ninety degrees after we fired torpedoes.”63

As Nimitz saw it, it was Walker’s desire to keep his guns firing that induced him to hold his course for too long – a charge that could also have been applied to his predecessors, such as Wright and Ainsworth. Nimitz doubted that the enemy force would have been significantly less damaged had Walker turned away briefly to avoid a salvo of


63 George Wilson, USS Chevalier Action Report, October 15, 1943, 6, Record Group 38, Box 33, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
torpedoes that he should have foreseen coming. In a criticism of the “gun-club” culture still extant in some circles of the navy, Nimitz reminded his commanders that

> While night gunnery actions are of spectacular and absorbing interest, our losses in them from (the) enemy’s shells have so far been considerably less than those from torpedoes and have in the past year been practically negligible. It has been the unexpected torpedoes that have done the damage, -- torpedoes in the salvo that could not possibly reach us, from the enemy group that had been overwhelmed by our gunfire, or from the isolated and unidentified “pip” which somehow got dangerously close to us before we knew it.  

Neither Nimitz nor King criticized Walker for maintaining a relatively steady course against Hara’s pair of destroyers in the battle’s second phase. This lack of censure was due to the fact that the captain of the flagship claimed to have seen torpedoes off both his bows, with the one that hit occurring on the starboard side, where he speculated that enemy motor torpedo boats were operating. In truth, there were no Japanese torpedo boats firing on the unengaged side of Task Group 31.2. But this claim absolved Walker of responsibility for neglecting to take evasive action for a second time on the same night.

Embarked on flagship *Selfridge* during the engagement was Lieutenant Commander Earl Caldwell, the torpedo control officer for the Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet. As an observer who was convinced that the heavier warheads were causing the Mark 15s to run deeper than set, Caldwell had persuaded Walker to order his captains to set their torpedoes to run at five and seven feet, rather than the eight and twelve feet prescribed by the current doctrine. In his report of the battle, he wrote that the four feet stagger was unnecessary. Although the alternate depth settings were designed to prevent adjacent torpedoes from colliding en route to the target, Caldwell pointed out that since destroyers discharged these weapons in three-second intervals, there was no danger of

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64 Nimitz, Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – October 1943, January 18, 1944, Annex C, 4-5.
this occurring. He noted that in this action the *Selfridge’s* 31-knot speed carried the ship 52 yards in three seconds – a distance more than adequate to preclude the torpedoes from bumping into each other. Consequently, he argued that the depth stagger should be eliminated and all torpedoes set to run at five feet to insure that no torpedoes passed under the target. Although a more shallow hit was likely to strike an enemy vessel’s armor belt, Caldwell asserted that the larger warheads on the Mark 15s produced a sufficiently powerful explosion to sink its victim at any depth. When Captain Burke returned to lead the destroyers in the next battle, he ordered the depth stagger eliminated and all torpedoes set to run six feet below the surface.

**The Return of Arleigh Burke**

As mentioned, Arleigh Burke had been relieved as commander of the “Slot” destroyers and ordered to rejoin his Destroyer Division 44 in Espiritu Santo on August 3. Three days later Burke was ordered to take command of Destroyer Squadron 12 (comprising Destroyer Divisions 23 and 24) at Noumea, New Caledonia, with his flagship in the *Farenholt*. Although Burke welcomed the opportunity to lead a squadron of destroyers, he was disappointed to learn that this unit was currently performing escort duties, often with the ships of the squadron dispersed on separate missions. In mid-September, South Pacific headquarters ordered Burke to bring his squadron to Purvis Bay for “Slot” duty, but no enemy task forces were encountered during this two week stint. At the end of September Burke was promoted to captain and his squadron was sent back to Espiritu Santo for some much-needed overhaul.

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65 Earl Caldwell, Action with Enemy Surface Units North of Vella Lavella during the Night of October 6, 1943, October 23, 1943, 2-3, Record Group 38, Box 33, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
As luck would have it, Admiral Merrill’s Task Force 39 (renamed from Task Force 19) was also based there. The nucleus of this unit was Cruiser Division 12, composed of four Cleveland-class light cruisers. In support were the eight ships of Destroyer Squadron 23, comprising Destroyer Divisions 45 and 46. In preparation for the expected invasion of Bougainville Island in the northern Solomons, Merrill trained his ships intensively in daytime and nighttime exercises. However, since the four vessels of Destroyer Division 46 had not yet arrived in Espiritu Santo, Merrill frequently asked Burke to lend him four of his ships to allow him to conduct maneuvers with a full complement of destroyers. Burke, of course, was more than happy to oblige and always included his flagship in these loans. These drills not only improved the tactical skills of the task force, but reminded Merrill of Burke’s talents as a destroyer commander.

With the invasion of Bougainville scheduled for November 1, South Pacific headquarters arranged to send as many naval units as possible for liberty in Sydney, Australia. On October 19 Burke’s Destroyer Squadron 12 arrived for a welcomed period of rest and recreation. On Burke’s first evening ashore, he joined a party being hosted by Merrill and his staff. Enjoying the brief respite away from the war, Burke was annoyed when one of his crewmen arrived with a message. But he immediately perked up when he read the dispatch. It ordered him to leave at once for Espiritu Santo to take command of Destroyer Squadron 23.

Merrill had been trying to get Burke transferred back to his task force ever since he had been ordered away last May. Disappointed with his destroyer squadron commander’s performances during the October exercises, Merrill became more assertive in his efforts to get Burke returned to his command. Burke’s excellent reputation at
Halsey’s headquarters and Merrill’s persistence finally paid off just in time for him to take charge of Merrill’s destroyers before the invasion of Bougainville.66

Burke flew to Espiritu Santo the next day and formally assumed command of Destroyer Squadron 23 aboard his flagship *Charles Ausburne* on October 23. On this same day Burke met with members of Merrill’s staff, who informed him that Merrill intended to follow the precepts Burke had espoused in his “Employment of Destroyers” doctrine last May. Later that day, Burke assembled five of his available captains and his second-in-command – Commander Bernard Austin, commander of Destroyer Division 46. At the meeting he handed out a document entitled “Destroyer Squadron Twenty-Three Doctrine.” This was a refined exposition of his earlier tenets on the use of destroyers in combat. Although primarily a condensation of his May 7 “Employment of Destroyers” treatise and August 1 Battle Plan, it also included a few ideas derived from his more recent experiences, such as the use of slower speeds to reduce ship wakes. He informed his captains that these were the concepts on which he would lead the squadron into battle.

**The Battle of Empress Augusta Bay**

In the summer of 1942 Admiral King had envisioned the Guadalcanal invasion as a preliminary step toward the subsequent seizure of Rabaul shortly afterward. However, the drive toward Rabaul had been more difficult than expected. A much-longer than anticipated campaign at Guadalcanal had been followed by an arduous and frustrating push through thick jungle to capture Munda in the central Solomons. The troubles

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66 Aaron Merrill, Letter to Commander of Destroyer Squadron Twenty-Two, May 29, 1943, 1, The Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO Files, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard; Robert Carney, (South Pacific Force Chief of Staff), Letter to Arleigh Burke, October 7, 1943, 1, the Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO File, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
encountered in the Munda campaign prompted Nimitz to recommend that Halsey bypass well-defended Kolombangara Island and instead make a landing on virtually unoccupied Vella Lavella Island in August 1943. The gambit proved successful and American forces had constructed an airfield on the island by the end of September.

But there could be no circumventing of Bougainville Island at the northern end of the Solomons chain. Roughly 200 miles southeast of Rabaul, Bougainville was a necessary way station for Halsey’s South Pacific forces. Its capture would bring U.S. single-engined fighters and bombers within range of Rabaul, a prerequisite for the planned assault against the Japanese base.

At first, the prospect of an invasion of Bougainville seemed daunting. Not only was the island the largest in the Solomons archipelago (130 miles long and 30 miles wide), but it was covered with jungle even more impenetrable than that found on Guadalcanal. It also contained approximately 60,000 Japanese troops and naval personnel, most of which were concentrated at the northern and southern ends of the island (around the Buka and Buin airfields) and at their bases in the Shortland Island group, just off the southern end of the island.67

Rather than replicate the Munda campaign strategy of attempting to conquer one of the Japanese air bases, Halsey wisely planned to land forces on a remote section of the island and construct his own airstrip, thereby compelling the Japanese to attack him. The place selected for the landing was Cape Torokina, a small protuberance on the northern end of Empress Augusta Bay, a wide recession on the western coast of Bougainville. Situated about 50 miles north of Buin, the U.S. landing site would be secure from an

67 Morison, Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier, 281.
overland Japanese counterattack for weeks or months, giving the American forces the
time to secure their position and build their airfield without interference from enemy
ground forces.

Prior to the invasion of Bougainville (set for November 1), a number of
preliminary operations were initiated to weaken and confuse Japanese defenses. To
suppress Japanese airpower, General MacArthur’s V Army Air Force conducted
numerous raids against the Japanese airfields at Rabaul while Halsey’s South Pacific Air
Force (Task Force 33) struck the Buin and Shortlands bases. On October 27, American
forces landed on the weakly-defended Treasury Islands, about 20 miles south of the
Shortland Island group. Its capture by the first week of November provided the United
States with a forward radar station, a PT boat base and a staging point for small craft
headed to Bougainville.

As a diversion, a battalion of Marines landed on the island of Choiseul, southeast
of Bougainville, on October 27. After raiding a couple of Japanese outposts and making
the Japanese believe this island was Halsey’s next objective, the Marines withdrew.

Due to Nimitz’s concentration of naval strength in the central Pacific for the
invasion of the Gilbert Islands set for late November, Halsey’s South Pacific command
had only one significant surface force – Admiral Merrill’s Task Force 39. This unit of
four light cruisers and eight destroyers was all that was available to protect Admiral
Wilkinson’s amphibious fleet. On October 30 Halsey and his staff met with Merrill at
Guadalcanal. They informed him that his task force would bombard the two Japanese
airfields at Buka on the night before the invasion, followed by a dawn bombardment of
Japan’s airbases in the Shortland Island group. Following this, Task Force 39 would
retire to an area north of Vella Lavella to be in a position to intercept any enemy surface forces attempting to interfere with the landing. After receiving his marching orders, Merrill traveled back across the sound to Purvis Bay and gathered together his commanders to inform them of their missions. At 0230 on October 31, Task Force 39 departed Purvis Bay and headed for Buka.

The amphibious fleet (Task Force 31), commanded by Admiral Wilkinson, carried the 14,000 man-strong 3rd Marine Division in eight transports and four cargo ships. A squadron of destroyers provided a close escort, with mine craft and a pair of tugs in support. With only about 270 Japanese defenders guarding the landing sites, the Marines had little difficulty getting ashore and establishing their beachhead.68 Two Japanese air raids were intercepted by U.S. fighters operating from Munda and Vella Lavella, limiting the damage inflicted by the Japanese attackers to a near miss on one transport. By 1800 that evening all the troops and most of the equipment had been put ashore. With the coming of darkness, Wilkinson ordered all the transports to retire, reassuring the Marines that the four partially unloaded cargo vessels would return in the morning.

At Rabaul, the American landing in Empress Augusta Bay had taken the Japanese by surprise. Since MacArthur’s medium and heavy bombers frequently raided Rabaul from their bases in New Guinea, the Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet, Admiral Mineichi Koga, had withdrawn most of Admiral Samejima’s 8th Fleet to the safety of Truk in the central Pacific. However, as luck would have it, Rear Admiral Sentaro Omori had recently escorted a convoy to Rabaul with his Cruiser Division 5

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68 Ibid., 300.
(heavy cruisers *Myoko* and *Haguro*) and Destroyer Squadron 10 (light cruiser *Agano* and three destroyers). When a Japanese scout plane had spotted Merrill’s northbound force in the “Slot” on October 31, Samejima had sent Omori’s unit down to intercept it. However, because Merrill had left the “Slot” and approached the Buka airfields from the west, Omori had failed to make contact and had returned to Rabaul at 1100 on November 1. When he arrived, Samejima informed him of the American landing in Empress Augusta Bay and ordered him to prepare to sortie again to smash the invasion force in a nighttime strike, as Mikawa had intended to do in August 1942 at Guadalcanal.

Omori’s departure was delayed while Samejima assembled a counter-landing force to send along with Omori’s task unit. However, a reconnaissance pilot’s overestimation of the U.S. naval forces at Cape Torokina prompted Samejima to recall the transport group, allowing Omori’s force to steam on alone toward Cape Torokina on the evening of November 1. As he proceeded toward Bougainville, Omori deployed his ten ships into three columns. In the center were the heavy cruisers *Myoko* (flagship) and *Haguro*, which were under Omori’s direct command. On the left flank was the victor of the Battle of Vella Lavella, Admiral Ijuin. From the light cruiser *Sendai*, he led the three destroyers of Captain Hara’s Destroyer Division 27. On the right flank was Rear Admiral Morikazu Osugi in the light cruiser *Agano*, leading three destroyers from his Destroyer Squadron 10. Both Omori and Osugi were newcomers to the South Pacific, a fact that made the veterans Ijuin and Hara somewhat uneasy.

American reconnaissance planes had spotted Omori’s force as he returned to Rabaul that morning and when he departed again that evening. When Halsey learned that
this formidable force had put to sea again and was heading toward Empress Augusta Bay, he ordered Merrill to steam north to intercept.

Whether Merrill realized it or not, the unfolding situation was reminiscent of the set up for the Battle of Savo Island. As had happened on that night in August 1942, a strong Japanese cruiser-destroyer force steamed toward an American beachhead intent on breaking up the invasion in a night action. But the similarities ended there. Unlike at Savo Sound, the American task force commander was well-informed about the approach of his adversary. In a demonstration of the high level of interservice cooperation achieved by the South Pacific forces, the American scouts that that successively reported the enemy’s estimated composition, position, course and speed were army pilots. The information they provided allowed Merrill to plot a point of interception approximately 45 miles west of Cape Torokina, giving him plenty of sea room to operate. Moreover, his knowledge of the enemy’s rate of advance enabled Merrill to steam northward at a moderate speed of advance, greatly reducing his ships’ tell-tale wakes.69

Undoubtedly, Merrill’s biggest advantage over the U.S. commanders that preceded him was a battle plan based on a doctrine that incorporated the lessons of past actions. Although Merrill’s operational plan stated that the task force would be governed by the principles contained in Nimitz’s “Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine, U.S. Pacific Fleet” (PAC-10), in reality the admiral had no intention of adhering to its precepts concerning the tactical employment of his force.70 South Pacific commanders had long

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69 Aaron Merrill, Task Force 39 Action Report, November 3, 1943, 3, Record Group 38, Box 168, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

70 Aaron Merrill, Task Force 39 Operation Plan No. 3-43, October 29, 1943, 3, Record Group 38, Box 168, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
recognized that the “V” and “Wedge” formations prescribed for cruiser-destroyer task forces were unsuited to the conditions in the “Slot.” In a letter to Arleigh Burke in October 1943, Halsey’s chief of staff Rear Admiral Robert Carney had written that he hoped “to abolish those abortions from the written page and from the memories of people concerned with light forces.” Rather than using the “V” and “Wedge” dispositions, U.S. commanders beginning with Admiral Scott at the Battle of Cape Esperance had opted to employ a miniature fleet disposition, with destroyers tied to the front and rear ends of the cruiser battle line. But this formation robbed the destroyers of their primary offensive weapon and subjected them to the withering firepower of the enemy’s guns. Moreover, these elongated formations steaming on steady courses proved especially vulnerable to enemy torpedo fire.

Recognizing these drawbacks, Merrill planned to employ neither the “V” and “Wedge” formations nor the downsized fleet action arrangement. Instead, he would follow the concepts espoused by his destroyer commander, Arleigh Burke. Although Burke had recommended that both destroyer divisions precede the cruisers in parallel columns, Merrill opted to split them between van and rear, a configuration similar to those used in the past. (He did this so that he would have a destroyer division positioned to attack immediately if his opponent attempted to circumvent his force and sneak into Empress Augusta Bay from the south.) But in a break with precedent, Merrill gave his two destroyer division commanders permission to leave the cruisers and conduct independent torpedo attacks against the enemy’s flanks as soon as he was detected. And to give his destroyers the opportunity to surprise the enemy, Merrill intended to keep his

71 Robert Carney, Letter to Arleigh Burke, October 7, 1943, 1, The Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO files, Box 1, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.
guns quiet until the torpedoes struck home or until the enemy discovered the American presence.

As for the cruisers, Merrill’s primary concern was to keep them out of the path of the enemy’s torpedoes. He warned his captains that past actions indicated that the enemy possessed a torpedo with “phenomenal range” and an explosive charge twice as powerful as the Mark 15. To protect his cruisers from this threat, Merrill planned to undertake frequent course changes. In addition, he intended to engage the enemy at long range – between 16,000 and 20,000 yards. Fighting at this distance would not only reduce the danger posed by Japanese torpedoes, but would enable Merrill to exploit his advantage in radar-directed gunfire.\footnote{Merrill, Task Force 39 Action Report, November 3, 1943, 15-17.}

Task Force 39 steamed northward in three columns. In the center were Merrill’s four light cruisers, \textit{Montpelier} (flagship), \textit{Cleveland}, \textit{Columbia} and \textit{Denver}. Off the starboard bow of the flagship were the four ships of Burke’s Destroyer Division 45 – \textit{Charles Ausburne} (Burke’s flagship), \textit{Dyson}, \textit{Stanly} and \textit{Claxton} – in battle formation; they were in column, not spread out in an anti-submarine disposition. Also in battle formation off the port quarter of rear cruiser \textit{Denver} were the four vessels of Commander Bernard Austin’s Destroyer Division 46 – \textit{Spence} (Austin’s flagship), \textit{Thatcher}, \textit{Converse} and \textit{Foote}. Austin and his division had only recently arrived in the South Pacific and had not had time to practice together before going into action. Although Merrill and Burke had informed Austin and his captains of the plan of action, time did not permit them to fully rehearse their mission.

At 0100 on November 2 Merrill ordered all crews to General Quarters. At 0219 the task group made its first radar contact. The “skunk” was off the starboard bow and
The Battle of Empress Augusta Bay (First Phase)
November 1-2, 1943

Map 13. The Battle of Empress Augusta Bay (First Phase)
moving southwards. This caused some momentary confusion until the contact was identified as the amphibious fleet’s mine laying unit retiring after having laid a defensive field north of the invasion area. The commander of this unit radioed Merrill that he was bringing his aerial “snooper” with him.

As the minelayers passed down the starboard side of Task Force 39, the Montpelier’s SG radar picked up another “pip” at 0227. This time it bore to the northwest at a range of 38,000 yards. In a minute or two the radar screen depicted three enemy columns approaching on a southeasterly course. The radar operator reckoned that the center group contained four cruisers, with a column of four destroyers on each flank. At 0230 Merrill radioed this finding to his force. When the SG radar on the Charles Ausburne picked up this contact one minute later, Burke immediately swung his division out of line to the northwest. As he did, he notified Merrill that he was proceeding with his torpedo run. Eager to have his rear destroyers attack the enemy’s southern flank, Merrill asked Austin if his radar scope on the Spence had acquired the enemy force. Steaming approximately six thousand yards behind the Montpelier, Austin replied that his radar screen was still empty of contacts.

Drawing to the north of his enemy, Merrill signaled his remaining force to prepare to execute a simultaneous course reversal to the south. Wanting to keep Austin in the lead of his destroyers, Merrill ordered Destroyer Division 46 to prepare for a column turn. When Merrill radioed “execute” at 0238, the four cruisers wheeled around to starboard simultaneously, putting the flagship in the rear of the southbound column. At the same time Austin led his destroyers in a follow-the-leader countermarch, putting his
unit in front of the cruisers. Unfortunately, rear destroyer Foote misunderstood the order and turned simultaneously, placing it far ahead of its division.

At 0243 Austin reported that his radar scope had finally registered the contact to the northwest and requested permission (in violation of the plan) to attack. Merrill assented and instructed him to strike the enemy’s southern column. Austin thereupon swung his division (except the out-of-position Foote) westward to begin his attack run.

To the north, Burke was already racing toward his launching point off the port bow of the enemy’s northern column. At 0245, with the range down to 5,600 yards, he ordered his division to fire a half salvo of torpedoes to port. Twenty Mark 15s, all set to run at a depth of six feet, leapt into the water. Once they were away, Burke ordered a ninety degree turn to starboard and radioed Merrill that “the guppies are swimming.”73

On the Japanese flagship, Omori was searching for the “one cruiser and three destroyers” reported to be about fifty miles west of Bougainville by one of his scout pilots an hour ago. Although the Myoko was equipped with a search radar set, the device was primitive by American standards and its operator lacked adequate training in its use. Omori therefore had to rely on his lookouts and aerial observers.74

At 0200 one of Omori’s pilots flying over Cape Torokina erroneously reported the area to be full of cargo ships unloading supplies. Since the American transports had already left, the pilot had mistaken the soon-to-depart mine laying unit for the amphibious force. This false report whetted Omori’s desire to smash the invasion fleet as soon as he disposed of the four-ship covering force reported earlier.

73 USS Cleveland, Transcript of TBS Log, November 9, 1943, 2, Record Group 38, Box 168, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

74 Morison, Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier, 310.
At 0245 the “snooper” that had been following the retiring minelayers dropped a flare over Merrill’s main body as it passed by on a reciprocal course, revealing its presence to Omori’s lookouts. To close the range, the Japanese commander led his two cruisers to the south, a move that Osugi’s starboard column mimicked. To the north, Japanese lookouts in Ijuin’s group spotted Merrill’s vessels off their bow and Burke’s destroyers off their port beam. Realizing that American torpedoes were probably already on the way, these vessels immediately began to turn away to starboard, enabling them to evade all of Burke’s torpedoes. As they spun, Hara’s Shigure fired “Long Lances” at Burke’s retreating destroyers while the other three ships launched theirs toward Merrill’s cruisers to the southeast.

Aboard the Montpelier Merrill anxiously awaited the expected explosions signaling that Burke’s torpedoes had reached their targets. However, at 0249 (about two minutes before they were due to hit) Merrill’s Combat Information Center informed him that the enemy columns were pivoting to the south. Concluding that the enemy had spotted Burke’s destroyers and was turning away, Merrill (in accordance with his battle plan) ordered his ships to open fire. Although Omori’s two heavy cruisers were the biggest targets, Ijuin’s Sendai was the closest ship, and hence, drew the attention of Merrill’s radar-directed gunfire first. The concentrated gunfire resulted in hits just after the Sendai had released its torpedoes and was completing its turnabout. The plummeting shells sparked explosions and jammed the ship’s rudder, reducing it to slow circling. The panicky maneuvers to avoid torpedoes and shellfire caused the Samidare and Shiratsuyu to collide, inflicting significant damage on both. The Shigure turned southward in pursuit
of the American main body, but was unable to find any targets and eventually retired without firing another shot.

Meanwhile, Omori and Osugi led their columns south to engage Merrill’s cruisers. Apparently losing sight of his opponent, Omori led his two cruisers in a counterclockwise loop in an attempt to reacquire him. Osugi, on the right flank, attempted to follow the task force commander’s movements. However, in doing so, he unwittingly brought his column across the path of the *Myoko*. Consequently, Omori’s flagship rammed into Osugi’s third ship in line – the *Hatsukaze*. With a piece of its bow shorn off, the wounded destroyer turned and began to limp homeward.

While this was going on, Austin and his Destroyer Division 46 were heading westwards toward Omori’s cruisers in the center rather than Osugi’s column on the southern flank, as directed. Finding himself in Merrill’s line-of-fire, Austin led his ships in a temporary turn to the south, nearly paralleling the tracks of the torpedoes fired by Ijuin’s ships at the U.S. cruisers. However, the wayward *Foote*, which was racing to rejoin the division, exposed its beam to the incoming missiles and caught a torpedo at 0308. The explosion blew off the ship’s stern, rendering it immobile and out of the fight.

As Austin’s remaining three ships turned westward again, their radar signatures began to merge with the “pips” of Omori’s cruisers, causing Merrill’s radar operators to lose track of them. Their approach also drew Japanese gunfire. While undertaking evasive maneuvers to avoid their shells, flagship *Spence* and *Thatcher* sideswiped one another, causing minor damage. The collision prompted Austin to hasten to the bridge from his station in the Combat Information Center two decks below. A dud shell then
Map 14. The Battle of Empress Augusta Bay (Second Phase)
struck the *Spence* at the waterline. The hit punctured an oil tank, allowing seawater to begin fouling the fuel supply.

As the American destroyers approached to within 5,000-6,000 yards of Omori’s heavy cruisers, Austin prepared to unleash his torpedoes. However, his departure from the *Spence*’s Combat Information Center had caused its inexperienced personnel to become discombobulated. Before Austin gave the order to fire, the officer-in-charge suddenly announced that the two ships before them were friendly. With the duplicate radar scope on the bridge out and without time to verify this assertion, Austin swung his three ships northward and set his sights on the circling *Sendai*. In doing so, he missed an excellent opportunity to deliver a crippling blow to Omori’s heavy cruisers.

Austin’s new target – the *Sendai* – was battered, but still afloat and full of fight. As his ships approached, they came under fire from the light cruiser. A spread of torpedoes from the *Spence* and *Converse* resulted in two explosions, but the *Sendai* refused to sink. Austin, however, reckoned the *Sendai* was doomed and set off in pursuit of the damaged *Samidare* and *Shiratsuyu*, which had abandoned their flagship when Austin’s ships appeared. Eventually the American destroyers closed to gunfire and torpedo range. But none of the American shells or torpedoes found their mark. Neither did the “Long Lances” fired in return by the two retreating ships. Following this exchange, the seawater contaminating the *Spence*’s fuel tank caused the ship to intermittently lose speed, and the flagship broke off the chase, allowing the *Thatcher* and *Converse* to continue on without it. But the U.S. pair soon gave up their pursuit and

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75 Ibid., 317.
turned eastwards in retirement. The *Spence*, however, kept searching for enemy cripples to the west.

To the south, the main gun action was taking place between Merrill’s and Omori’s cruisers. Since opening fire on the *Sendai*, Merrill had executed several simultaneous countermarches to upset the aim of Japanese torpedomen. At 0310, with the *Sendai* apparently finished, he undertook yet another course reversal to the south to engage the two other enemy columns. From a distance of 20,000 yards, the American light cruisers let loose with their rapid-firing six-inch rifles. The U.S. ships employed their guns in full radar control since, as Merrill later admitted, the gun flashes from the enemy’s return fire “appeared as bare pin points and were useless for ranging or even roughly estimating range.”76 Despite the voluminous radar-directed fire, few American shells found a target. Only one or two struck the *Myoko*, with six hitting the *Haguro*, only two of which detonated.77 Merrill, however, was convinced that his gunfire was wreaking havoc on his enemy in the distance.

After having lost sight of the U.S. cruisers earlier, Omori’s lookouts finally spotted them again as they came under attack at 0313. Omori bore his southbound cruisers to a south-southeasterly direction to reduce the range and ordered his ships to return fire. In this long-range duel Omori’s directors demonstrated a skill in Japanese gunnery that had been sorely lacking during the last year. With brilliant star shells and airplane-dropped flares illuminating the target, the Japanese gunners repeatedly bracketed the U.S. cruisers with their shellfire. The captain of the *Cleveland* noted that the U.S.

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cruisers “steamed through the (shell) splashes before they had fallen away.” The frighteningly-close proximity of the water spouts induced Merrill to commence zigzagging. When this failed to throw off his enemy’s aim, he ordered his ships to fire star shells short of the enemy in the hopes of blinding his gunners. But the brightness of these projectiles paled in comparison to the intensity of the Japanese lights gently cascading behind the American column.

Having maintained his present heading for six minutes, Merrill realized that he was due for another course change if he wanted to keep out of the enemy’s torpedo water. With the range down to 13,000 yards and fountains of water still erupting around his ships, he ordered his ships to make smoke. After a few more tense minutes, he directed his ships to turn into this protective cloud with a simultaneous countermarch to port. The maneuver caused the torpedoes fired by Omori’s and Osugi’s vessels to pass harmlessly behind them. As the American ships reached the safety of their own fumes, the enemy’s gunfire ceased. Despite the many near-misses, only four shells had struck the U.S. cruisers, none of which had detonated. Merrill later admitted that “had the enemy’s luck been as good as his shooting(,) we would have suffered severe casualties.”

Seeing his opponent disappear into a pale of smoke, Omori incorrectly assumed that he had sunk several ships. But, like Mikawa before him at the Battle of Savo Island, Omori decided against a foray toward the American transports, which he believed were still off the landing beaches. Under the newfound belief that his opponent consisted of seven heavy cruisers and twelve destroyers, Omori opted not to tempt fate and ordered a

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78 A.G. Shepard, USS Cleveland Action Report, November 9, 1943, 9, Record Group 38, Box 168, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

retirement at 0337. When Merrill belatedly realized that his enemy was retreating, he swung his cruisers westward and gave chase. But his adversary’s head start ensured his escape.

To the north, Burke’s Destroyer Division 45 reappeared after an hour’s absence from the battle zone. Following his post-torpedo attack turn-away to the northeast, he was preparing to re-engage when he realized that two of his ships were missing. As it turned out, the captains of the Stanly and Claxton had mistaken Merrill’s radio voice for Burke’s and had erroneously obeyed a command to countermarch to the south. Heeding his own doctrine, which stipulated that destroyer divisions should remain concentrated in order to aid identification and avoid mêlées, Burke decided to forgo an immediate attack with his flagship and Dyson and instead set out to find the Stanly and Claxton. When he finally re-assembled his division, he led it back toward the enemy. Encountering the foundering Sendai at 0349, Burke’s ships pumped five-inch shells into it as they steamed by. Hoping to find more wounded prey, the division continued on to the westward, leaving the sinking Sendai behind.

As Burke’s division pressed onward, they saw flashes of gunfire in the distance. (This was the skirmish taking place between Austin’s ships and the retreating Samidare and Shiratsuyu.) As he neared the scene of action, Burke’s foremost concern was the whereabouts of Destroyer Division 46, or rather the scattered ships of that unit. By listening in on the TBS circuit, he knew that the Foote had been torpedoed and was in the vicinity of Merrill’s cruisers to the south. Burke was also aware that Austin’s flagship

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had become separated from the Converse and Thatcher due to propulsion difficulties. When an unidentified ship appeared off his bow at 0415, Burke called Austin and told him that he had a what appeared to be a smoking ship in his sights and was about to open fire on it. Austin replied, “Oh-oh, don’t do it, that’s us.”81 In truth, Burke’s intended target was not the Spence, but one of the fleeing Japanese destroyers. The mix-up enabled the enemy to get away.

Still searching for targets, Burke continued on his westward heading and detected what he believed to be the Converse and Thatcher on an opposite course. At 0438 he radioed Merrill that “There’s a hell of a lot of ships of both nationalities in one little huddle on our port bow. If we can identify one as enemy, we will take care of him!”82 A few minutes later Burke’s lookouts sighted what appeared to be an enemy ship off the port beam. Since the ship was proceeding to the west at a reduced speed, Burke and his captains figured that this was a disabled enemy ship. At 0442 Burke ordered his division to open fire. Austin frantically radioed that shells were straddling his flagship and asked if anyone was firing at him. Realizing their mistake, Burke’s ships ceased firing before any of their shells struck the Spence.

Following this incident Burke led his division in a loop to the north while Austin led the sputtering Spence to the south. The latter, however, was not finished dodging friendly fire. A few minutes later Merrill and his cruisers, which had steamed westward in pursuit of Omori’s and Osugi’s retiring columns, spotted an unidentified ship to the north. Unsure of its identity, Merrill ordered the Montpelier to fire a salvo off its bow.

81 Arleigh Burke, Destroyer Squadron Twenty-Three Action Report, November 4, 1943, 14, Record Group 38, Box 168, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
82 Ibid.
When no word of protest was heard, he ordered his entire division to open fire at 0458. Austin once again grabbed the TBS transmitter and got the firing stopped before his ship was hit.

In the last action of the night the Spence caught sight of the bowless Hatsukaze to the east, limping along in a northwesterly direction. Approaching to within 4,000 yards, the Spence identified it visually as an enemy vessel and opened fire. Austin’s five-inch shells sparked fires and brought the Japanese destroyer to a halt. Running low on ammunition, Austin asked Burke’s division to come back and finish it off, which it did.

With the radar scopes of Task Force 39 now empty of unidentified vessels and daylight approaching, Merrill ordered his destroyers to rejoin his cruisers. He directed the Claxton to take the crippled Foote in tow, with the Charles Ausburne and Thatcher as escort. The remaining force hurried ahead toward home. As expected, a Japanese air strike from Rabaul appeared a few hours later. Passing by the vulnerable Foote and Claxton, the attackers flew on toward Merrill’s main body and attacked. However, excellent ship-handling, anti-aircraft fire and the timely appearance of U.S. fighters limited the damage to a couple of small bomb hits on the Montpelier, which disabled its starboard catapult. The entire force, including the Foote, made it back to Purvis Bay without further incident.

Assessment of the Battle

Throughout the Solomons naval campaign U.S. task group commanders had repeatedly committed two fundamental errors – poor employment of U.S. destroyer forces and the underestimation of the enemy’s torpedo threat. At the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay, as this encounter was called, Merrill finally rectified these mistakes.
Merrill was the first commander of a U.S. cruiser-destroyer task force to truly respect the danger posed by the enemy’s torpedoes. Previous commanders, such as Admirals Wright and Ainsworth, had acknowledged this potential hazard, but had done little about it. In their engagements with Japanese surfaces forces they had steamed their lengthy columns on steady courses, recklessly exposing their beams to the Imperial Navy’s torpedo batteries. Merrill’s scrutiny of these engagements led him to conclude that Japan possessed a weapon of superior range and explosive power and that he would have to act with this in mind. Consequently, Merrill kept his opponent at bay and undertook frequent changes in course throughout the battle. He wrote afterward that “Whenever either (enemy) wing group appeared to be in a position for a maximum range torpedo shot, the cruiser column would reverse course by simultaneous turn movement.”\footnote{Merrill, Task Force 39 Action Report, November 3, 1943, 18.} Pleased with these precautions, Nimitz praised Merrill for adhering to his plan to frustrate the enemy’s torpedo attacks.\footnote{Chester Nimitz, Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas – November 1943, February 28, 1944, Annex F, 2, Record Group 334, Box 367, National Archives II, College Park, MD.} Not since Scott’s victory at Cape Esperance in October 1942 had U.S. cruisers been spared any torpedo hits in a nighttime battle (excepting Merrill’s encounter with two Japanese destroyers on his way to bombard Vila in March).

The other major failing of U.S. task force commanders had been their improper use of destroyers. Beginning with the encounter off Cape Esperance, U.S. destroyers had been appended to the cruiser line and employed chiefly as gun ships. Deferring to the ideas espoused by Burke, Merrill revamped the cruiser-destroyer relationship. U.S. Naval War College President Admiral William Pye noted that although Merrill’s initial
formation resembled those used so “disastrously” in the past, there was one crucial difference.

The destroyers were not tied in close to the main battle line, and held there until within gun range. They were loose, well removed from the cruisers, with flexibility and freedom of action. They were used offensively instead of defensively…

King added that “The timely, effective, offensive use of destroyers in this night action demonstrated elementary lessons already known but not always followed.”

Although Merrill granted Burke and Austin the freedom to act independently, their actions were governed by a doctrine agreed upon by the task force commander. Burke wrote that he knew what Merrill wanted him to do. Likewise, Merrill was well aware of what Burke intended to do. This mutual understanding enabled Burke to carry out his assignment without having to be ordered to do so. The same relationship existed between Burke and his captains. Because Burke had indoctrinated them beforehand, he issued only two commands during the initial torpedo attack – “launch torpedoes,” followed by “Turn 9” (the ninety degree turn-away). By dispensing with unnecessary instructions during the heat of battle, Burke was able to conduct his torpedo attack quickly and flawlessly. The fact that Ijuin’s group avoided this torpedo strike by an emergency maneuver in no way detracts from the excellence of the attack’s execution.

Although Task Force 39 had employed its destroyers effectively (at least in the case of Burke’s division) and had maneuvered smartly to avoid enemy torpedoes (except

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85 William Pye, Comments on Battles off Empress August Bay, November 1-2, 1943, and off Cape St. George, November 24-25, 1943, January 13, 1944, 3, The Papers of Arleigh Burke, Pre-CNO Files, Box 2, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC Navy Yard.

86 Ernest King, Battle Experience, Naval Operations South and Southwest Pacific Ocean Areas, October 6 – November 2, 1943, May 8, 1944, Chapter 66, 2, Record Group 334, Box 444, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

for the *Foote*), some of the old difficulties persisted. For example, several ships experienced temporary outages of some radar and communications gear due to the shock from the main batteries. However, these disruptions were brief and had no effect on the outcome of the battle. In addition, while American reconnaissance aircraft accurately tracked Omori’s approach toward Empress Augusta Bay, the “Black Cats” assigned to provide aerial observation during the action failed to arrive.

Another enduring problem for U.S. task forces was the difficulty of distinguishing friend from foe. This battle included two incidents of friendly fire and one case of mistaking an enemy vessel for a U.S. ship. These episodes all involved the *Spence*, which had become separated from its division, indicating that Burke’s dictum to maintain unit cohesion was the best means of identification short of an effective IFF system for surface ships. Still, the chaotic hunt for enemy cripples by scattered American units near the end of the battle prompted Nimitz to write that the navy needed to develop a doctrine of pursuit in order to ensure a more organized chase and “mop-up” of a fleeing enemy.88 Such a recommendation was an acknowledgement of the U.S. Navy’s growing confidence and prowess in nighttime warfare.

With the issues of destroyer employment and torpedo avoidance resolved by changes in doctrine, the U.S. Navy’s biggest remaining problem in night battle was the continued inaccuracy of its radar-directed gunfire. To make matters worse, virtually no one was aware of this trouble. Merrill and his captains sincerely believed that the cruisers’ six-inch guns had inflicted serious injuries on their enemy. Merrill reported that the gunnery of his task force was “superb,” adding that his ships “started hitting

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immediately.” The usually wary King agreed, stating that “The results obtained by our gun batteries under full radar control has (sic) been most gratifying.”

The truth, however, was that the accuracy of the American gunfire was anything but “gratifying.” Of the 4,591 six-inch projectiles fired by Merrill’s cruisers, only about a dozen of them struck their targets, mostly against the Sendai and Haguro. Merrill, of course, never suspected that only one-quarter of 1 percent of his shells hit the enemy. After all, he noted in his battle report that during radar-directed gunfire practices his task force usually straddled a target at 20,000 yards on the first salvo. Unfortunately for the U.S. Navy, the results achieved under these controlled conditions did not translate into hits during combat.

Despite the relative ineffectiveness of American gunfire, the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay was an undisputed triumph for the U.S. Navy – the first such victory for an American cruiser-destroyer force (except for Merrill’s encounter with two enemy destroyers in March) since the Battle of Cape Esperance over a year earlier. Task Force 39 had not only protected the Marines recently landed at Cape Torokina, but had sunk a light cruiser and destroyer in exchange for the wounding of the Foote. The tribulations of Austin’s Destroyer Division 46 notwithstanding, Merrill justifiably concluded that his task force had functioned as a “well drilled team.” He was especially proud of his cruiser division. He wrote that despite more than an hour of high-speed maneuvering and

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90 King, Battle Experience, May 8, 1944, Chapter 66, 23.
92 Merrill, Task Force 39 Action Report, November 3, 1943, 34.
pirouetting through the din of gunfire and the haze of smoke, “not once was the formation in any way confused or disrupted.” And there was more truth than bravado in his summation that while “his losses might have been greater, the final outcome of the battle was never in doubt.”

The Battle of Cape St. George

Fortunately for the United States, Commander of the Combined Fleet Admiral Koga’s decision to reinforce the 8th Fleet with seven heavy cruisers came too late to help Omori. However, their arrival in Rabaul in the first days of November represented a clear threat to the American foothold in Bougainville since Halsey had no heavy surface forces of his own. However, before these heavy cruisers sortied against Cape Torokina, a surprise U.S. carrier air strike on the morning of November 5 succeeded in damaging most of the Japanese cruisers, prompting Koga to recall them to Truk.

With the threat of a major surface attack removed, Merrill’s cruisers and Burke’s destroyers spent the next few weeks escorting succeeding echelons of troops to Cape Torokina. These activities often drew enemy air attacks, both during the day and at night. On one such night attack a Japanese bomber succeeded in torpedoing the light cruiser Denver. The ship was safely towed back to Purvis Bay, but the damage sustained necessitated that the ship return to the United States for repairs.

Although the Japanese succeeded in removing the Denver from the war for six months, their air offensive against the American perimeter on Bougainville and the shipping supplying it came at a high cost. By mid-November the Japanese had lost 70

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93 Ibid., 18-19,41.
percent of their Rabaul-based aircraft. American fighters from Vella Lavella and the new field in the Treasury Islands enabled the United States to gain dominance in the air over the northern Solomons.

With the growing strength of the U.S. air forces rendering the Japanese air bases on Bougainville unusable, Admiral Kusaka began to think about withdrawing the valuable aviation personnel stationed there. Bowing to pressure from his army counterpart, General Imamura, Kusaka agreed to organize a “Tokyo Express” to transport a contingent of troops to Buka, which Imamura believed to be Halsey’s next target. After dropping off these men, Kusaka’s ships would then embark the underutilized naval air crews and support staff and bring them back to Rabaul, where they could be more gainfully employed.

When American intelligence caught wind of Japan’s evacuation (but not reinforcement) plan, Halsey decided to send the five available destroyers from Burke’s Destroyer Squadron 23 to intercept them. Although Halsey had rejected Nimitz’s suggestion last July to employ independent destroyer groups to smash the “Tokyo Expresses,” the exploits of Moosbrugger and Burke had convinced him that his destroyers were more than capable of handling such a mission. Uncertain of when the enemy intended to conduct this operation, Halsey ordered Burke to depart Purvis Bay on the afternoon of November 22 and sweep the shipping lane between Buka and Rabaul.

On the nights of November 22-23 and November 23-24, Burke’s five destroyers failed to make contact with their adversary. On the afternoon of November 24, as the destroyer squadron refueled from a tanker in Kula Gulf, Burke received a radio dispatch

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from South Pacific headquarters. Suspecting that the anticipated evacuation effort would take place that night, Halsey ordered Burke to expedite his refueling and proceed as quickly as possible to a point 35 miles west of Buka along the Buka-Rabaul shipping lane. Eager for action, Burke and his captains sped northwestward as soon as they had refilled their oil bunkers.

Halsey’s intelligence had been right. On the evening of November 24 Captain Katsumori Yamashiro conveyed 920 troops from Rabaul to Buka in destroyers *Amagiri* (flagship), *Yugiri* and *Uzuki*. Captain Kiyoto Kagawa provided an escort in destroyers *Onami* (flagship) and *Makinami*. After dropping off the troops at Buka, Yamashiro’s three ships took aboard the 700 aviation personnel and departed at 0045, planning to catch up with Kagawa’s group, which had left earlier to scout ahead.

To improve his chances of intercepting the enemy, Burke raced his ships to a point 55 miles west of Buka, reaching his destination at 0130 on the morning of November 25. Athwart the designated shipping lane, Burke turned his ships due north at 0140 and reduced his speed to 23 knots to keep his wakes hidden from overhead observers. He planned to steam northward for a few miles, followed by a turn to the southeast – the direction from which he expected his enemy to appear. He hoped that by approaching his opponent from the northwest, he might be more likely to catch him by surprise. Fortunately for Burke, typical Solomons weather conditions prevailed this night – overcast skies and frequent rain squalls, which limited visibility to about 4,000 yards.

The U.S. ships turned northward in two columns. In his flagship *Charles Ausburne*, Burke led the *Claxton* and *Dyson*, which comprised Destroyer Division 45. Off this column’s port quarter, Austin led the two ships of Destroyer Division 46, the
Map 15. The Battle of Cape St. George
Converse (flagship) and Spence. (Austin had shifted his flag to the Converse because its Combat Information Center was on the same deck as the bridge.) Barely a minute into the new heading, Burke’s ships detected and reported the presence of a radar contact approaching from the east approximately 22,000 yards away. Once this contact was confirmed, Burke wheeled his division to the east and ordered Austin to bring his two ships off his starboard quarter. Austin requested permission to take his division to the northeast to position it off the enemy’s starboard bow, but Burke refused. Although Moosbrugger and Simpson had achieved success at the Battle of Vella Gulf by attacking the enemy from different directions, Burke’s experience at the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay made him wary of dividing his squadron. He feared that allowing Austin to engage the enemy from the opposite bow might result in a confused mêlée or friendly fire. He therefore told Austin to remain off his quarter, on the unengaged side.

As Burke led his squadron toward the contact, he maintained his speed of 23 knots in order to keep his bow waves small. As the Combat Information Centers determined the enemy’s course, speed and bearing, directors hastily computed torpedo solutions. On a reciprocal course with the enemy, Burke brought his flagship to a point approximately 5,500 yards off his opponent’s port bow – “a perfect torpedo set up…a destroyers officer’s dream” stated the captain of the Charles Ausburne later. At 0156 Burke ordered his division to execute “William” (fire torpedoes). Fifteen torpedoes (a half salvo from each ship), all set at a depth of six feet, leapt into the water and commenced a 4,000-yard run northwards. Once they were away, Burke ordered both columns to turn away to the south to avoid possible enemy torpedoes.
Burke need not have worried. The Japanese had no idea they were being targeted until they spotted American torpedo wakes approaching their beams. With less than thirty seconds before impact, the Japanese vessels had no chance to evade the attack. Two or three Mark 15s struck the *Onami* and another hit the *Makinami*. The multiple detonations on the former produced a 300-foot tower of flame. The ship crumpled and plunged to the bottom within a minute. The more fortunate *Makinami* was left disabled, but still afloat.\(^95\)

Three minutes into the torpedoes’ 4.5 minute run, Burke’s SG radars detected a second enemy column approaching from the east, approximately 13,000 yards behind the first group. Burke now decided to part company with Destroyer Division 46 after all. He ordered Austin to reverse course to the north and finish off the first group while he took his division eastwards to attack the second group.

The explosions and fires on the *Onami* and *Makinami* alerted Yamashiro to the danger ahead and he immediately swung his three ships to the north in retreat. Prevented from executing a second surprise torpedo strike, Burke turned his ships to the northeast in pursuit. Soon Burke’s ships were nearly directly astern of their quarry, trying desperately to close the range. At 0215 Burke became concerned that his predictable path made him vulnerable to an enemy torpedo attack. Without any evidence that enemy torpedoes might be on the way, he swerved his column to starboard and prepared to resume his original heading after a minute or two. But before he could return to his base course he heard several explosions to the rear. Burke raced to the side of the bridge to see which of

\(^95\) Arleigh Burke, Destroyer Squadron Twenty-Three Action Report, November 26, 1943, 6-7, Record Group 38, Box 606, National Archives II, College Park, MD; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, 356.
his ships had been hit. To his relief, both the Claxton and Dyson were unharmed and still in column. Burke realized that the explosions were enemy torpedoes detonating in the frothy wakes created by his ships’ dog-leg to the right.

Although an American torpedo attack was out of the question, Burke’s stern chase had succeeded in reducing the range from 11,000 to 8,000 yards. At 0222 Burke ordered his column to echelon to the left and open fire with the two forward guns. A few minutes later the Japanese ships separated into an arrow-head formation. Flagship Amagiri led the way, with Uzuki and Yugiri off the port and starboard quarters, respectively. This maneuver unmasked the aft turrets of all three Japanese ships, allowing a greater volume of return fire. And to the concern of Burke and his captains, the Japanese shells fell uncomfortably close. On several occasions Japanese shell splashes drenched the bridge of the Claxton. Also disconcerting was the effectiveness of the Japanese flashless powder, which prevented the Americans from discerning when the enemy fired or identifying what ship was firing on whom. To throw off his opponent’s aim, Burke ordered his ships to begin “fishtailing.” This maneuvering helped the U.S. ships avoid any damage.

The American gunfire was not much better than the Japanese. Although each of Burke’s destroyers fired on a different target, none of its shells scored. Part of the problem was the poor optical situation. Not only was the enemy’s gun flashes invisible, but the U.S. ships exhausted their supplies of flashless powder, forcing them to switch to smokeless powder. The blazes associated with this propellant worsened the Americans’ night vision. On the other hand, technicians had recently installed salvo buzzers on

96 Ibid., 15.
Burke’s destroyers, a recommendation made nearly a year ago by the *Pensacola’s* gunnery officer in his report on the Battle of Tassafaronga. By sounding just prior to the guns going off, the bridge personnel had the opportunity to close their eyes before the gun flash. However, as Burke later admitted, this new procedure helped, but was no substitute for more flashless powder.97

Although the shells of Burke’s division failed to strike their targets, the U.S. gunfire nevertheless prompted the Japanese vessels to scatter at 0235. The *Uzuki* turned westwards, the *Amagiri* bore to the northwest and *Yugiri* continued on to the north. Opting to keep his division together, Burke decided that all his destroyers would pursue what appeared to be the largest enemy ship – the *Yugiri*. The *Amagiri* thus escaped unscathed while the *Uzuki* disappeared to the west with only one dud hit.

Now that all three of Burke’s ships were firing on the *Yugiri*, the Japanese ship began to incur hits. Finally, at 0305, the American five-inch shells began to spark explosions aboard their target and the *Yugiri*’s speed dropped precipitously. Eventually the ship stopped all together, allowing Burke’s ships to overhaul their victim and pump five-gun salvoes into him as they steamed by. Burke then countermarched his division for another pass at the stationary target. This second round of gunfire finally succeeded in sinking the *Yugiri*. Following the dispatch of this ship, Burke turned his column westwards to pursue the other two enemy ships, which he erroneously believed had suffered significant gunfire damage.

Meanwhile, to the south, Austin was maneuvering his two ships to finish off the *Makinami*. Believing his target to be a helpless cripple, Austin somewhat carelessly

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97 Ibid.
approached his enemy and steadied on his course to set up a torpedo shot. Before the attack was executed, the crew of the Converse felt a distinctive “thud,” as though the ship had been struck by a dud torpedo. (A subsequent underwater examination showed no damage, but it is likely that the ship was hit by a faulty torpedo.) One minute later Austin gave the order for the flagship to fire a spread of five torpedoes. He then turned his column away to avoid any other enemy torpedoes that might be headed his way.

After seeing two explosions, Austin felt confident enough to reverse course and close in for the kill. At 0228 he ordered his division to open fire with full broadsides. With no return fire emanating from their opponent, the Converse and Spence blazed away with impunity. With the Makinami afire throughout its length, Austin ordered a cease fire at 0240 and hastened northwards to join in the main action.

Recalling the many enemy cripples that had made it back to base to fight another day, Burke ordered Austin to return to his original target and sink it before rejoining his division. Austin therefore led his two ships back to the Makinami and resumed firing until multiple internal explosions aboard the ship finally caused it to sink at 0255.

Austin’s two ships eventually joined up with Burke’s division shortly after the latter had dispatched the Yugiri. Under the belief that there were two wounded enemy ships that might be run down, Burke led his reformed squadron at maximum speed westward, toward Rabaul. However, with no sight of the enemy and New Ireland’s Cape St. George (the gateway to the eponymous channel leading to Rabaul) on the radar screen, Burke reluctantly abandoned the hunt and led his ships homeward at 0405. To Burke’s surprise, no enemy air attacks materialized after daybreak and his ships made it safely back to Purvis Bay that evening.
Assessment of the Battle

Under the mistaken belief that his opponent comprised two groups of three ships, Burke triumphantly declared upon his return to base that his task group had sunk four enemy vessels and damaged another. Although later evidence indicated that Destroyer Squadron 23 had sunk only three Japanese ships, there was no disputing Burke’s remarkable performance in this encounter. Like Moosbrugger before him, Burke went into battle with a sound battle plan and executed it brilliantly. U.S. Naval War College President Admiral Pye wrote that from the American perspective the engagement was “an almost perfect action,” one that “may come to be considered a classic.” He attributed this success to “careful planning, a well drilled and indoctrinated squadron, proper use of our material advantages, and an aggressive leadership.” As Pye viewed it, the battles of Empress August Bay and Cape St. George demonstrated the degree to which the U.S. Navy had learned from its past mistakes and the progress made in its ability to fight successfully at night. The recent encounters were proof, he wrote, that “on anything like equal terms… (U.S. naval forces) are much more than a match for the Japanese.”

Nimitz and King were equally complimentary of Burke’s performance. The latter praised Burke for again proving the soundness of the new doctrines, including the execution of an initial torpedo attack, the abeyance of gunfire and the early turn-away. Moreover, he wrote that it was “gratifying” to see that Burke had taken measures to ensure that no problems of identification took place, as had occurred in the last battle.

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98 Pye, Battles of Empress Augusta Bay and Cape St. George, January 13, 1944, 1, 5.

99 Ernest King, Battle Experience, Battle off Cape St. George, New Ireland, November 24-25, 1943, Surface and Air Attacks on Nauru Island, December 8, 1943, August 10, 1944, Chapter 68, 7, 17, Record Group 334, Box 444, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
Nimitz not only commended Burke for his ability to achieve surprise without the aid of land background (which Moosbrugger had exploited at Vella Gulf), but also for his decision to split his force. Retreating somewhat from his earlier warnings about dividing the task force, Nimitz applauded Burke’s decision to have Austin’s division “mop-up” the first enemy while the squadron commander pursued the second enemy with his division. But he noted that this action again demonstrates the need to devise a doctrine for pursuing an enemy that is scattering and fleeing for home.100 Of course, the fact that such a need existed was testimony to the degree to which the U.S. Navy had begun to dominate its opponent in nighttime warfare.

The Conclusion of the Solomon Islands Campaign

In conjunction with some newly arriving naval units, Merrill’s cruisers and Burke’s destroyers continued to provide support to the transport craft delivering supplies and reinforcements to the American perimeter on Bougainville. On December 7, 1943, the navy’s construction battalions completed the first airstrip at Torokina, allowing U.S. fighter planes to reach Rabaul for the first time. Over the next couple of months American aircraft methodically destroyed Japan’s air forces at Rabaul. By the end of February 1944 only a token number of Japanese aircraft remained in New Britain. Proof of the feebleness of Japan’s air power at Rabaul came on February 15, 1944 when Halsey’s South Pacific forces invaded Green Island, located only 115 miles to the east.

So confident were Halsey and his senior commanders of the newfound prowess of the U.S. Navy’s night-fighting capabilities that they attempted to entice their enemy into sending a surface force to oppose this landing. However, the Japanese refused to

challenge the two American cruiser-destroyer task forces waiting for them. (In addition to Merrill’s Task Force 39, Admiral Ainsworth had returned to the South Pacific with his Task Force 38, built around the repaired light cruisers Honolulu and St. Louis.)

Since the Japanese refused to come to him, Halsey decided to send his destroyers into the waters surrounding the Bismarck Archipelago. On the night of February 17-18 he ordered Destroyer Squadron 12, under the command of newly-promoted Captain Roger Simpson (who had led Moosbrugger’s second destroyer division at the Battle of Vella Gulf), to steam up St. George Channel and bombard Rabaul. Such a bold strike against the enemy’s epicenter of power in the South Pacific would have been unthinkable a few months ago. A few days later Burke’s squadron circumnavigated the island of New Ireland, bombarding Rabaul and Kavieng (the base at the northern tip of New Ireland) along the way. More attacks followed. Soon U.S. destroyers began conducting offensive sweeps north of the Bismarck Islands in an attempt to cut the shipping lanes to Truk and Palau. Much like General William Sherman’s “March to the Sea” in 1864 revealed the power of the Union Army, so too did Halsey’s destroyers display the strength of the U.S. Navy. By roaming the enemy’s territorial waters at will, Burke, Simpson and the other destroyer commanders demonstrated that the U.S. Navy ruled the seas of the South Pacific, by day and by night.

In the end, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to forgo an invasion of Rabaul and opted to bypass it. General MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific forces occupied the western end of New Britain in December 1943 and later conquered the Admiralty Island group (northwest of Rabaul) in March 1944. On Bougainville, Japanese troops from Buin finally completed their trek through the jungle and attacked the U.S. forces at Cape
Torokina in the second week of March 1944. As expected, American ground troops repelled the Japanese assault, ending Japan’s hopes of rolling back Halsey’s northward drive. On March 20 Halsey’s forces met no opposition when they landed on Emirau Island (north of Rabaul). The subsequent establishment of air bases here and in the Admiralties effectively sealed off Rabaul from the rest of the Japanese Empire, condemning its 100,000-man garrison to a life of deprivation as it sat out the rest of the war. Japan’s Bismarck barrier had finally been breached, with its central bastion rendered irrelevant. Along with effective air and ground power, it was the U.S. Navy’s ability to master the art of nighttime warfare that made this achievement possible.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

During the years before World War II the U.S. Navy trained and equipped itself to fight a daylight fleet action against its expected adversary – the Imperial Japanese Navy. Because America’s naval leaders assumed that a conflict with Japan would be decided by a titanic clash between fleets, they developed a doctrine that focused on the daylight gunnery duel between the opposing battleships. However, the naval war that erupted after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor proved to be different from what American commanders had anticipated. With the U.S. battleships incapacitated at the outset of the war, the first six months of the Pacific conflict at sea involved mostly naval-air actions, with the U.S. Navy’s carrier-based aircraft striking enemy bases, supply ships or aircraft carriers. With naval operations dominated by attacks conducted by carrier task forces, American cruisers and destroyers spent the bulk of their time engaging in daylight anti-aircraft actions in defense of the carriers.

After the American victory at the Battle of Midway, the United States took the offensive and inaugurated the Solomon Islands campaign with the invasion of Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942. The landing ended the U.S. Navy’s hit-and-run strikes and placed its surface vessels in a situation where they would have to defend waters in close proximity to Japanese naval units. However, except for a few minor encounters involving vessels of the diminutive U.S. Asiatic Fleet in the Dutch East Indies in January and February 1942, the U.S. Navy had yet to confront its opponent in a major surface battle. It was out of practice in the art of surface warfare and was especially unprepared to engage in such an action at night.
This state of affairs became painfully clear on the night of August 8-9, 1942 when a Japanese naval unit smashed the Allied force protecting the transport craft off the beaches of Guadalcanal. The battle proved to be the U.S. Navy’s worst defeat of the war. The Japanese victory forced the devastated Allied screening force to withdraw the next day and cede the waters around Guadalcanal to the Imperial Navy.

As humiliating as the battle was for the United States, it had a salutary effect – it prompted the American leadership to examine its shortcomings and begin instituting changes to better enable U.S. naval light forces to fight at night. After reviewing the participants’ battle reports, the Pacific Fleet’s Commander in Chief Admiral Nimitz concluded in December 1942 that the defeat had been attributable to surprise and crew fatigue. Admiral Hepburn, appointed by the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet Admiral King to conduct a special investigation of the disaster, also cited surprise as the leading cause of the defeat. In response, Nimitz created a new condition of battle readiness which put the crews at their battles stations in a relaxed state. This new procedure and the elimination of the U.S. Navy’s peacetime mindset ensured that no subsequent U.S. task forces operating in the South Pacific were ever caught unawares again. In addition, to combat the uncontrollable fires that had erupted on the Allied cruisers off Guadalcanal, Nimitz instituted a more stringent policy of removing all unnecessary flammable materials aboard ship, a measure that saved several ships from destruction in subsequent engagements. Other mistakes, however, such as the failure to exploit the available SG radar and the failure to assign a commander to each division, were not recognized at the time by the commanders in the South Pacific. Consequently, Admirals Scott and Callaghan went into battle in October and November aboard flagships
not equipped with SG radar and Admiral Halsey sent task forces led by Admirals Lee and Wright to sea without a divisional commander to lead the destroyer units. Not until King and U.S. Naval War College President Admiral Pye pointed out these mistakes after the Guadalcanal campaign had ended were they corrected.

The initial assessments of the Solomons naval battles conducted at Pearl Harbor were undertaken by Nimitz’s Gunnery and Training Division staff. As the department’s title implies, these officers also had responsibility for supervising the readiness of the Pacific Fleet’s personnel, weaponry and warships. However, because these staffers were becoming overburdened with work, Nimitz decided to relieve them of their battle analysis function at the end of the Guadalcanal campaign and create an Analytical Section to perform this duty. This new organization spent the bulk of its time evaluating the naval battles in order to determine the operational failures committed by U.S. naval forces. These reviews were published and distributed throughout the fleet to prevent the repetition of mistakes.

At his headquarters in Washington, DC, King created a similar organization. Within his Readiness Division he established a Tactical Analysis Section in December 1942. The staffers in this department helped the Commander in Chief prepare his Battle Experience bulletins, which critiqued the naval actions taking place in the South Pacific and elsewhere.

By the spring of 1943 the analytical organizations at King’s and Nimitz’s headquarters were in place and the evaluations of the Guadalcanal naval battles completed. New commanders preparing for action in the central Solomons therefore had access to insightful assessments of the early engagements. Of course, the naval
commanders who defended Guadalcanal in 1942 had to do so without these instructive materials. Following the Battle of Savo Island, Admirals Scott, Callaghan, Lee and Wright had only the raw action reports of their immediate predecessors to work with.

Two months after the Battle of Savo Island South Pacific commander Admiral Ghormley decided he was ready to confront the Japanese Navy at Guadalcanal again. He sent a cruiser-destroyer task force under Scott to intercept a Japanese force that was preparing to bombard Henderson Field. Catching its enemy off guard, Scott’s unit scored a minor success (which the Americans erroneously believed to have been as definitive a victory as their defeat had been in the previous encounter), providing the navy with a much-needed boost in morale and confidence. Unfortunately for the U.S. Navy, when American commanders in the South Pacific learned of this action from Scott’s report and from the returning captains, they drew the wrong lessons. Because the triumph had been achieved exclusively with gunfire, American officers assumed that their prewar notion about the supremacy of the naval rifle had been vindicated. As a result, succeeding U.S. task force commanders focused their efforts on bringing their guns to bear against the enemy. In imitation of Scott, they tied their destroyers to the cruiser line for defensive purposes, a move that virtually disarmed the destroyers of their torpedo power. Moreover, since the Japanese had been able to fire only a few torpedoes (without success) at the Battle of Cape Esperance, South Pacific officers discounted the threat posed by this weapon. It would take nearly a year’s worth of fighting before the U.S. Navy learned to respect the power of the surface-launched torpedo – its own and those of the enemy.
Not surprisingly, there were some problems that the U.S. Navy never did resolve before the end of the Solomons campaign. The most significant of these was the widely-held belief that the navy’s radar-controlled gunfire was accurate. Even the cautious Nimitz and King subscribed to the exaggerated claims made by the senior officers involved in these battles. To be sure, nighttime radar-directed gunfire practices had demonstrated that U.S. gunners could straddle their target up to 20,000 yards away on the first salvoes. But in the less controlled environment of actual combat, American gun directors failed to score many hits. Most of the U.S. Navy’s gunfire successes were achieved as a result of an overwhelming concentration of fire against a single target, as had been the case with the sinkings of the *Takanami* at the Battle of Tassafaronga, the *Niizuki* at the Battle of Kula Gulf, the *Jintsu* at the Battle of Kolombangara and the *Sendai* at the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay. This unwavering faith in the efficacy of the gun prompted successive U.S. commanders to seek to defeat the enemy in a traditional “capping of the T” manner. Consequently, the employment of torpedoes was deemphasized (despite Japan’s effective use of them) until late in the campaign when U.S. destroyermen were given the opportunity to fight alone.

In a related problem, the U.S. Navy was also never able to achieve an even distribution of gunfire. Only after it became apparent that many Japanese ships had escaped the initial deluge of American shells in the two battles in Kula Gulf in July 1943 did Halsey and Nimitz begin to realize this problem. Of course, they (and King) still believed that the U.S. gunfire was accurate. It just needed to be apportioned better.

Another problem unresolved by the U.S. Navy during the campaign was the difficulty it had in distinguishing friend from foe. Although task force commanders
clamored for a workable radar-based IFF system, the navy failed to implement such a mechanism in time. As a result, incidents of friendly fire or mistaken identity occurred throughout the South Pacific struggle. King argued that much of the trouble was due to the failure of U.S. forces to maintain an adequate plot of enemy and friendly forces. But this was sometimes difficult to do during battle, especially when units of the task force separated. Captain Burke, however, argued that keeping the various divisions concentrated would help alleviate this problem. But this was not always feasible if one or two ships from a division suffered battle damage, as had happened to Commander Austin’s destroyer division at the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay. Overall, however, this difficulty did not have a significant impact on the navy’s operational effectiveness.

A problem of relatively minor significance was the tendency for various American radars and communications gear to become disabled from the shock of their own ships’ gunfire. Despite the frequency of these outages, crews usually restored them to functionality quickly, and hence, they typically had little effect on the outcome of the battles. Perhaps the one exception to this was during the Battle of Kolombangara when Ainsworth’s TBS transmissions grew faint, resulting in a confused countermarch that led to the torpedoing of the HMNZS Leander.

The performance of the U.S. Navy’s “Black Cat” reconnaissance planes also proved disappointing throughout the campaign. Although American daytime scouts provided excellent information on the movements of Japanese forces in the “Slot,” the nighttime flying boats sent to provide American naval forces with real-time information typically failed to be of any help. Even when these pilots found the enemy cruising beneath them, they often failed to establish communication with the U.S. task force
commanders. On the one occasion when this aerial observation service took place – at the Battle of Kolombangara – it proved ineffective. Although the “Black Cat” pilot notified Ainsworth of the approach of his enemy, he failed to be an effective gunnery spotter or inform Ainsworth that the force approaching from the northwest at the end of the battle was a hostile one. Fortunately for the U.S. Navy its SG radar provided a viable alternative to overhead surveillance, a recourse that was not available to the Japanese.

On the other hand, the U.S. Navy succeeded in solving the more critical problems it encountered in nocturnal warfare. Following the Battle of Cape Esperance the navy eliminated the confusing terms of “roger” and “bogies” and discontinued the use of relative bearings in radio transmissions. Naval commanders also learned to refrain from using search lights and recognitions lights, which they recognized attracted accurate enemy gunfire.

When new construction eliminated warship scarcities, the navy discontinued the practice of sending hastily-assembled ships from diverse units into battle in favor of the employment of whole divisions or squadrons. It also made sure that division commanders were present to lead the subgroups of a task force. The benefits of these practices were best demonstrated at the Battle of Vella Gulf, when two division leaders led their well-drilled units in a coordinated attack. For the most part, unit cohesion was maintained throughout the subsequent engagements.

Similarly, the navy recognized the need to allow task force commanders the opportunity to indoctrinate their subordinates and drill their ships before going into battle. The failure to allow for this before the Battle of Savo Island and the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (part one) proved costly. In response to this need, Halsey kept Ainsworth
and Merrill in command of their respective task forces throughout 1943, promoting a
degree of familiarity that had been missing in 1942. Although the destroyer commanders
spent less time with their units, it was still sufficient to achieve a sense of mutual
understanding throughout the division and with the task force it was attached to. This
state of affairs was especially apparent from August through November 1943, when
commanders Moosbrugger, Simpson, Burke and Merrill maneuvered their units with few
orders and little or no confusion. Much of this success was attributable to the pre-battle
conferences, where the participants agreed upon plans of action against any foreseeable
contingency. It is probably not coincidental that this four month period also witnessed
the cessation of Halsey’s practice of attaching ships to a task group at the last minute,
which had earlier hindered the cohesiveness of these units.

To be sure, material improvements played a role in the growing effectiveness of
the U.S. Navy. The most important of these was the correction of the Mark 15’s various
faults. Like the submariners’ Mark 14, the destroyers’ weapon ran too deep and
possessed a complicated exploder mechanism that rarely worked as designed. Despite
the many failed attempts by American destroyers to dispatch crippled friendly ships with
torpedoes, Nimitz and the Bureau of Ordnance were slow to recognize that the Mark 15
was problematic. Not until the summer of 1943, when Nimitz finally ordered the
magnetic influence exploder deactivated and destroyer captains began to set shallower
depths, did the Mark 15 become a potent weapon. Fortunately for the navy, this
development took place just as the destroyermen were given the opportunity to employ
their weapons in an effective manner.
Although the navy had developed flash-suppressors for its torpedo tubes before the start of the Solomons campaign, shortages prevented their use until the Battle of Vella Gulf. Once again the navy was fortunate that such a device became available to the fighting forces just when it could make a difference. After all, flash-eliminators would have been irrelevant before the Mark 15’s problems were fixed or while the destroyers remained tied to the cruiser line.

Because the navy had expected to fight during the day, it had developed a powder that produced little smoke when fired. Before the outbreak of war, senior U.S. naval officers believed that this new propellant gave them an advantage since there was little muzzle smoke to obscure their vision. Unfortunately, this powder produced a bright light when ignited, which proved to be a major handicap in nighttime operations. Therefore the arrival of flashless powder in 1943 was universally welcomed by the American captains employing it in battle. Its primary advantage was not that it concealed the U.S. ships from the enemy (which it did not do), but that it significantly reduced the blinding effect it had upon the night vision of American gunners and other topside personnel.

The last significant material improvement was the greater availability of SG radar. Introduced in the spring of 1942, this device had been installed on only one vessel present at the Battle of Savo Island – the light cruiser *San Juan*. In the battles that followed, more and more ships were equipped with this electronic marvel. By 1943 virtually all U.S. warships in the South Pacific possessed an SG radar set. Unfortunately for the United States, the first commanders in the Solomons campaign failed to recognize its significance. Consequently, Admiral Crutchley sent the *San Juan* to patrol the eastern entrance to Savo Sound on the night of August 8-9 while Scott and Callaghan failed to
place their flag in an SG radar-equipped ship. Such mistakes limited the value of this superior instrument. However, the near universal installation of these machines aboard U.S. warships by 1943 ensured that subsequent American task force commanders and captains were given early warnings of the enemy’s presence and disposition.

Although these improvements in weaponry were beneficial, they would have been of little help without the implementation of a new doctrine that exploited their potential. The main problem confronting American naval forces in the South Pacific was not inferiority in weaponry, but the manner in which the task units fought. Specifically, the modus operandi of the U.S. Navy was flawed in two fundamental respects – the failure to use destroyers offensively and the failure to take measures to avoid enemy torpedoes, which inflicted the overwhelming proportion of American warship damage.

Unfortunately, the two principal doctrinal changes introduced by Pacific Fleet Headquarters during the campaign neglected to address these two concerns. Neither Nimitz’s Pacific Fleet Tactical Bulletin No. 5TB-42 (Light Forces in Night Search and Attack, issued on November 14, 1942) nor his Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine, U.S. Pacific Fleet (PAC-10, issued on June 10, 1943) provided a solution to these twin problems.

Although these two publications proved unhelpful, the U.S. Navy eventually developed a winning formula for success based on perceptive evaluations of the early battles from both the senior and junior levels of the naval hierarchy. At the top of the chain of command were King and Nimitz, two officers of extraordinary intellect and insightfulness. With the assistance of their analytical organizations, they produced excellent narratives and critiques of the naval encounters, which were subsequently
distributed to officers throughout the fleet. Before going to sea, Commander Burke read these documents (and the action reports on which they were based) carefully, trying to comprehend the circumstances surrounding the earlier defeats in order to avoid making the same mistakes. To further his understanding of these battles, Burke discussed them at length with the officers in his destroyer division and those who had participated in these engagements. From these conversations Burke discovered that the veteran destroyermen were exasperated with the way their ships were controlled by the cruiser commanders. From the information obtained from these talks and the reports from Nimitz and King, Burke realized that his predecessors had made two primary errors. They had employed their destroyer units poorly and had done little to guard against enemy torpedo attacks.

As a divisional commander, Burke had more authority to advocate change than did his captains. When Burke subsequently expressed his dissatisfaction with the navy’s current practices to his task force commander, the latter asked him to submit his proposals in writing. On May 7, 1943, Burke sent Merrill his treatise on the employment of destroyers. Later, when Burke assumed command of the destroyer force operating independently from Purvis Bay, he elaborated on his ideas and introduced a battle plan that would henceforth become standard practice for destroyer units.

The crux of Burke’s new doctrine was the offensive employment of destroyers, combined with defensive maneuvers to minimize the threat posed by enemy torpedoes. As Burke admitted, his ideas were not original, but were a compilation of ideas gleaned from his readings of the campaign literature and discussions with his fellow officers. Indeed, the genesis of Burke’s doctrine can be found within the pages of Nimitz’s and King’s battle reviews. For instance, in his critiques of the Battle of Cape Esperance and
the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (part one), King had stated that all the destroyers should have been in the van and questioned why they had not conducted an independent torpedo attack against the enemy’s flank. Burke heeded this message and developed an attack plan whereby his destroyers would conduct an immediate torpedo strike against the enemy’s bow.

With regard to the torpedo menace posed by Japanese warships, King and Nimitz were quick to point out the problem, but were less sure of a practical countermeasure. King advocated higher warship speeds while Nimitz advised engaging the enemy from greater distances (neither of which was effective). However, by bringing this problem to the attention of the officers preparing to go into battle, King and Nimitz laid the groundwork for its eventual resolution. Within the pages of King’s Battle Experience bulletins was the advice offered by the captain of the torpedoed Pensacola at the Battle of Tassafaronga. He wrote that future commanders should be sure to undertake frequent changes in course when in contact with the enemy. Burke went beyond this suggestion and instituted the tactic of turning away from the enemy immediately after firing torpedoes. Influenced by Burke’s ideas, Merrill opted to employ frequent countermarches to keep his cruisers safe from torpedoes. Unlike a turn-away, this maneuver would allow Merrill to keep his guns bearing on the enemy.

When these tactics were first implemented by Moosbrugger at the Battle of Vella Gulf, the results were dramatic. Three of the four enemy destroyers present were sunk without any damage to the American force. At the Battle of Vella Lavella, Captain Walker neglected to undertake a temporary turn-away after firing torpedoes and suffered disproportionate casualties as a result. However, when Burke’s tactics were again
employed at the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay and the Battle of Cape St. George in November 1943, the result was more victories.

The new policy of preplanned turn-aways and countermarches stripped the Imperial Navy of its torpedo advantage. By utilizing its superior radar technology to launch surprise attacks, the U.S. Navy became the more potent torpedo force, despite the inferiority of its weapon. Thus, by employing its radars for torpedo – rather than just gunnery – solutions, the navy at long last fully exploited its radar advantage. In essence, the U.S. Navy achieved success once its destroyermen demonstrated to the “gun-club” officers that the torpedo was a devastating weapon in nighttime warfare.

Following the victory at Cape St. George, the new doctrine proved itself yet again during the next (and last) major nighttime surface clash of the war. During the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944, a Japanese surface unit consisting of two battleships, one cruiser and four destroyers approached the American landing zone on Leyte Island from the south via Surigao Strait. In accordance with doctrine, the battleships and cruisers countermarched across the northern end of the channel while destroyer units conducted torpedo runs against the flanks of the oncoming Japanese force. These destroyer attacks decimated the Japanese task group, requiring the battleships and cruisers to initiate only a brief barrage of gunfire to finish off the crippled enemy.

As evidence that the navy had truly learned from its experiences in the Solomons campaign, the late-war and early post-war tactical publications contained virtually all of the new techniques developed by Burke and others. Injunctions for destroyer commanders to be granted freedom of action, to attack immediately after contact and to
turn away after firing torpedoes testified to the fact that the senior naval leadership had embraced the practices painfully learned in the South Pacific.

The extent to which the U.S. Navy became an effective night-fighting force is evident not only by its domination of the South Pacific seas by the beginning of 1944, but also by a comparison of the losses suffered over the course of the campaign. During the nighttime engagements of the Guadalcanal phase of the struggle (August-December 1942), the U.S. Navy lost fifteen warships (including the HMAS *Canberra*) compared to Japan’s seven. The Imperial Navy also inflicted severe damage against twelve American vessels while suffering comparable injuries to only three of its own ships. By contrast, during the August – November 1943 phase of the Solomons campaign, the U.S. Navy sank nine Japanese ships for the loss of only one of its own. (The U.S. Navy suffered severe damage to two destroyers as well.) And of the nine Japanese ships sunk, six of them were dispatched primarily by torpedoes.

By the end of the Solomons campaign, two of the navy’s primary prewar deficiencies – its lack of preparation for nighttime combat and its lack of a suitable doctrine for such warfare – had been resolved. Improved equipment and intensive drilling at night rectified the former problem. The development of an effective nighttime doctrine proved more difficult to achieve. However, by August 1943, this problem had also been resolved. Much of the credit for this success was due to the organizational structure of the naval establishment. The analytical departments created by Nimitz and King successfully discerned most of the troubles plaguing the combat units and distributed their findings to the officers engaging the enemy. When the commanders in
the South Pacific heeded the observations made by Nimitz and King, the navy’s fortunes changed for the better.

Of course, before these reports reached the combat areas in early 1943, progress was slow. During the struggle for Guadalcanal at sea, the South Pacific’s task force commanders failed to realize the extent of the hazard posed by the enemy’s torpedoes or the foolishness of fettering their own destroyers to the cruiser line. The arrival of the CINCPAC and COMINCH battle evaluations in the South Pacific in the spring of 1943 provided the operational forces with much of the information needed to correct previous mistakes. However, change did not come immediately since “gun-club” advocate Ainsworth chose to repeat the tactics used by Scott, and consequently suffered severe damage in his two engagements in Kula Gulf.

On the other hand, Burke and his fellow destroyer officers absorbed the lessons contained in the battle reviews and established a tactical doctrine based upon them and their collective experiences. When first implemented at the Battle of Vella Gulf, the result was a definitive victory. Recognizing the effectiveness of these new techniques, Halsey and the Pacific Fleet’s commander of destroyers Admiral Tisdale disseminated the details of the new doctrine shortly afterward. On the eve of the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay, Merrill willingly bowed to the concepts espoused by his destroyer squadron commander, leading to another victory. In short, the navy had been able to devise a war-winning doctrine because new ideas were able to flow up-and-down the chain of command.
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