

World War II  
75th Anniversary Commemorative Series

COMBAT NARRATIVES

Solomon Islands Campaign: Volume XIII

Bougainville Operations and the  
Battle of Cape St. George

3–25 November 1943



Naval History and Heritage Command  
U.S. Navy





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# Bougainville Operations and the Battle of Cape St. George

3–25 November 1943

Office of Naval Intelligence, U.S. Navy



Naval History and Heritage Command  
Department of the Navy  
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Cover and frontispiece: Escorted by fighter planes, bombers roar out from the USS Saratoga (CV 3) for the 5 November 1943 raid on the Japanese base of Rabaul, New Britain (Bu Aer 44200, 5 November 1943).

Illustrations: The photographs displayed on the frontispiece and in the photo section of this publication are official U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps images, located by the editors in the original manuscript's source file at the National Archives, College Park, Maryland. The original wartime photo captions were lightly edited for stylistic consistency

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## EDITORS' FOREWORD

*Bougainville Operations and the Battle of Cape St. George* is an unpublished volume of the Navy's World War II combat narratives. The Publication Branch of the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) published 21 such combat narratives during the war. These provided historical narratives and distilled lessons learned from naval campaigns in both the Atlantic and the Pacific. In addition, 13 narratives remained in various stages of preparation when the program was cancelled in July 1945. Of the unpublished manuscripts, several are in a near-final state. For the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of World War II and to demonstrate how the Navy practiced high-velocity learning to win victory over the Axis powers, the Naval History and Heritage Command plans to make some these volumes available to the public online.

The combat narrative program originated in a February 1942 directive issued by Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander-in-Chief U.S. Fleet, who intended them to provide officers of the United States Navy historical overviews of important battles and campaigns of the war and relate any hard-won lessons from those engagements. In 1945, King wrote, "It is hoped that these narratives will afford a clear view of what has occurred, and form a basis for a broader understanding which will result in ever more successful operations." King, long a proponent of using naval history to educate the Navy's officer corps, saw the narratives as an essential means of training, as well as lending an immediacy to professional education; officers around the world could understand diverse operations occurring in far-flung theaters around the globe and gain from the Navy's battle experience.

As definitive historical accounts the combat narratives have long been superseded, first by Samuel Eliot Morison, who used them as a source for his 15-volume *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, and since then by a mountain of popular and scholarly accounts of naval operations. Even shortly after their publication, the narratives had their detractors. Although the narratives were largely popular, some critics within the Navy pointed to both factual and interpretive errors, as well as long completion times as drawbacks. Even Admiral King admitted that a complete and definitive narrative would prove too daunting a task for wartime accounts. Following the war, Commodore Charles J. Rend, deputy chief of naval intelligence, stated bluntly "these narratives contain many inaccuracies...we were not proud of them," and went as far to suggest that they never be released due to these inaccuracies.

Indeed, the narratives fall short of fully scholarly and definitive accounts. Due to their low classification level during the war and wide distribution throughout the fleet, the narratives did not reveal intelligence matters or other sensitive matters or delve much into grand naval strategy. Without Italian, Japanese, and German high-level sources, the wartime accounts often present fragmentary and incomplete accounts of Axis motives, strength, or casualties, and enemy forces largely remain shrouded in the fog of war. Unsurprisingly, factual errors turn up in the narratives, particularly in the as-yet unpublished volumes. Occasionally, superiors would suppress information embarrassing to the Navy and opinions critical of its actions.

As historical documents, however, the value of these narratives is unquestionable. The combat narratives may well be the first attempt to synthesize official documentation into historical accounts of the American naval operations of World War II. The volumes demonstrate American naval officers' attempts to understand, analyze, and exploit Axis behaviors while also learning from the successes and failures of the Allies. For today's general audience, the tactically focused narratives provide engrossing reading.

The Navy sought top talent to help it learn from its operations. The ONI team assigned to produce the narratives came from some of the most prestigious history departments and newspapers in the country and included two future American Historical Association presidents and a future United States congressman, Peter Frelinghuysen Jr. (R-NJ). C. Vann Woodward, later famous for his foundational and highly influential works of U.S. Southern history, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (1951) and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955), wrote *Bougainville Operations and the Battle of Cape St. George*. Woodward, teaching at Scripps College in California, had joined the Navy in 1943 and found himself assigned to ONI in March 1944. At the time, he told a friend “as a matter of fact the job has turned out to be pretty interesting.” As part of his duties, Woodward also prepared a narrative on the Battle of Leyte Gulf. He explained his approach to that history to a vice president of Macmillan Publishing: “The narrative, I think, should be kept as devoid of plush as a *Fletcher*-class destroyer” and “[t]he writing should be kept clear of ‘navalese’ and unnecessary technical jargon.” As is evident, Woodward used these same approaches in *Bougainville Operations and the Battle of Cape St. George*. After the war, Woodward went on to a long and lengthy career in academia. He almost returned to government service in the early 1950s, when the Historical Section of the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sought to hire him, but issues surrounding his security clearance prevented his hire.

*Bougainville Operations and the Battle of Cape St. George: Solomon Islands Campaign, Vol. XIII* begins in the aftermath of American landings at Cape Torokina on Bougainville Island in the Northern Solomons and the Allied naval victory in the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay. The landing formed part of Operation Cartwheel, the isolation and reduction of the Japanese bastion at Rabaul on the island of New Britain. American forces captured Cape Torokina in order to construct airfields within close bombing range of Rabaul. Despite the victories on land and sea, formidable Japanese forces remained in the area. Japanese sea power in the form of naval aircraft and heavy cruisers converged on Rabaul to turn back the American advances. Throughout November, U.S. naval forces defended the landing zone at Torokina, kept open vital lines of communication to the beachhead, struck the Japanese in their fortress, and confronted their naval forces at sea. The narrative ends in December, when Maj. Gen. Oscar W. Griswold, US Army, relieved Maj. Gen. Roy Geiger, USMC.

The American victories on and around Bougainville in November 1943 had far-flung consequences in the Pacific war. The operations hastened Japanese withdrawals from the Central and Northern Solomons and further secured Allied supply lines in the islands, the Southwest Pacific and between the United States and her allies. The heavy losses that Japanese naval air and sea power suffered in November operations precluded an Imperial Navy sortie from Truk

to contest the U.S. Central Pacific Force's operations in the Gilbert Islands later that month, the opening act in the Allied Central Pacific drive. The development of Cape Torokina's airfield also helped facilitate the neutralization of Rabaul, which, in turn opened the way to the Philippines.

The editors of this edition have faithfully reproduced a draft located at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. We have standardized the formatting, using the published combat narratives as our model. Otherwise, we have made minimal corrections, silently correcting the obvious typo or misspelling. We have incorporated marginal notes penciled on the draft by its original editors into the text, though in cases in which the comments affect the meaning or interpretation of the narrative, we have discussed it in a footnote. Footnotes added by Cheser and Luebke begin with "Editors' note." The manuscript located at the archives was not a final draft and should not be treated as such. It is the Navy's first draft at understanding its combat operations and the lessons learned, so that the later, earned in blood, would not have to be re-learned. Therefore, this document contains some factual and technical errors. For instance, the narrative treats Zeroes and Zekes as two different types of aircraft, though they were in fact codenames for the same model. Likewise, erroneous identifications of Japanese aircraft variants—such as an Aichi D3A "Val" carrying a torpedo—appear. The editors caution the reader to check the facts contained herein with more recently published histories on the subject.

The following works place the Bougainville operations narrative and the life of its author in greater context. They provide a starting point for further investigation of these topics:

Craven, Wesley Frank and James Lea Cate, eds. *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan, August 1942 to July 1944. The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol. IV, Air Force Historical Division. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950.

Miller, John, Jr. *Cartwheel: The Reduction of Rabaul. The United States Army in World War II*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1959.

Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier 22 July 1942–1 May 1944. History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Vol. VI. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953.

O'Brien, Michael, ed. *The Letters of C. Vann Woodward*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013.

O'Hara, Vincent P. *The U.S. Navy Against the Axis: Surface Combat, 1941–1945*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007.

Packard, Wyman H. *A Century of U.S. Naval Intelligence*. Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence and the Naval Historical Center, 1996.

Shaw, Henry I., Jr., and Douglas T. Kane. *Isolation of Rabaul. History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, Vol. II, Historical Branch, U.S. Marine Corps. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1963.

Toll, Ian W. *The Conquering Tide: War in the Pacific Islands, 1942–1944*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2015.

—S. Matthew Cheser and Peter Luebke, Ph.D.  
Histories Section, Naval History and Heritage Command



## FOREWORD TO THE ORIGINAL SERIES

1 March 1945

Combat narratives have been prepared by the Publications Branch of the Office of Naval Intelligence for the information of the officers of the United States Navy.

The data on which these studies are based are those official documents which are suitable for a confidential publication. This material has been collated and presented in chronological order.

In perusing these narratives, the reader should bear in mind that while they recount in considerable detail the engagements in which our forces participated, certain underlying aspects of these operations must be kept in a secret category until after the end of the war.

It should be remembered also that the observations of men in battle are sometimes at variance. As a result, the reports of commanding officers may differ although they participated in the same action and shared a common purpose. In general, combat narratives represent a reasoned interpretation of these discrepancies. In those instances where views cannot be reconciled, extracts from the conflicting evidence are reprinted.

Thus, an effort has been made to provide accurate and, within the above-mentioned limitations, complete narratives with charts covering raids, combats, joint operations, and battles in which our Fleets have engaged in the current war. It is hoped that these narratives will afford a clear view of what has occurred, and form a basis for a broader understanding which will result in ever more successful operations.



Admiral, USN  
Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations



**BOUGAINVILLE OPERATIONS AND THE BATTLE OF CAPE ST. GEORGE**  
**3-25 NOVEMBER 1943**



## INTRODUCTION

The beachhead on Bougainville, established on 1 November 1943, represented not so much an advance of the South Pacific frontier against the Japanese as it did a leap beyond the frontier into enemy territory. The landings at Cape Torokina were made some 80 miles behind the heaviest concentrations of enemy land forces in the area—those in the Shortland Island area and Southern Bougainville. To the rear of the beachhead also lay enemy airfields, seaplane bases, and fighter strips at Ballale, Porporang, Kieta, and Kara. About 70 miles beyond and to the northwest of our newly established holdings at Empress Augusta Bay were located the two active airfields of Buka and Bonis, lying parallel to each other on opposite sides of Buka passage at the northern end of Bougainville Island. Farther to the northwest, but still within easy bombing range was the great Japanese sea and air base of Rabaul, which the enemy had elected to make the main bastion of his position in the New Britain-New Ireland-Solomons area.

While it could be said that the bold strategy of landing at Empress Augusta Bay had placed Admiral William F. Halsey's forces astride the Japanese supply line from Rabaul to the Shortlands, it could be stated with equal justice that the bypassing operation had left the enemy astride our supply line from Guadalcanal to Empress Augusta Bay. It remained to be seen whose supply line would be cut, and which power would make best use of its position.

The days following the initial landing at Cape Torokina were the most critical period for the new operation. While the enemy forces were strongly emplaced to the southeast, with several well-developed airfields, the position of the Marines at Torokina was precarious and undeveloped. Our own airfields were yet to be cut out of the jungle and built up from mangrove swamp, and our forces were crowded into a narrow strip of beach between swamp and sea. Reinforcements and supplies for the beachhead had to be convoyed over a route that was patrolled from enemy airfields and invited attack from enemy bombers. The threat of superior surface forces descending from Rabaul had to be guarded against constantly.

Of immediate importance was the continued neutralization of the Japanese airfields on and around Bougainville. Photographic reconnaissance missions were sent out at frequent intervals to report on the progress of repair of bombed fields, and bombing missions were dispatched almost daily to strike fields that had been restored to or were approaching restoration of serviceability. On 4 November, for example, 57 SBD's and 19 TBF's with fighter escort dropped 57 tons of bombs on the field at Kahili, obtaining many hits on the runway and adjacent areas. After the strike the fighter cover strafed enemy shipping in the Matchin Bay area near Buka and sank two schooners and two barges. On the same day 23 B-24's dropped 46 tons of bombs on Buka airfield, obtaining excellent coverage. During the week that followed two strikes were carried out on the field at Kara, two on Buka and Bonis, and two on Ballale. At the end of the week all of these fields were revealed by photographs to be unserviceable.

It was the threat from enemy surface forces rather than air power, however, that was the cause of greatest concern to the South Pacific Command at this time. Under operational command of COMSOPAC there were only the cruiser task force of Rear Admiral Aaron S. Merrill, consisting of four light cruisers and their destroyer screen, and a carrier task force commanded by Rear Admiral Frederick C. Sherman, which was

composed of the *Saratoga* and the *Princeton*, two light cruisers, and ten destroyers. No other forces were available or located nearby. The Japanese were known to have superior naval forces at Rabaul. Photographs of Simpson Harbor taken on 5 November revealed the presence of seven heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, two destroyer leaders, and twelve destroyers. In the words of Admiral Halsey, "the situation...was becoming desperate."

A series of seven air strikes on Rabaul by the Fifth Army Air Force of the Southwest Pacific Area beginning on 12 October had failed to prevent the enemy from continuing to concentrate large surface forces in Simpson Harbor. An Army Air Force strike by some 75 B-25's and 80 fighters on 2 November was reported to have sunk three destroyers and eight medium-sized cargo vessels, and to have damaged two heavy cruisers, two destroyers, seven medium cargo vessels, and two tankers in the harbor, and to have shot down 67 intercepting Japanese fighters in air combat.<sup>1</sup> Even this successful attack did not drive the enemy surface forces out of Rabaul and back to Truk, and the menace to our landing at Empress Augusta Bay remained to be reckoned with.

Admiral Halsey came to the conclusion that, "nothing but a successful carrier strike could prevent the enemy from employing his surface force offensively and disastrously to our cause." Up to that time it had been considered too great a risk to employ carrier strikes against such a strongly defended base as Rabaul. Under the circumstances, however, it was believed necessary to use the only carrier force available in the South Pacific area for this purpose. "The plan accepted the fact that the *Saratoga* air group might virtually be wiped out," wrote Admiral Halsey.

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1 Editor's note: The reviewer of the manuscript left a pencil notation that reads "Could you check these sinkings with Jamie Andrews + maybe make a footnote showing the Army claims were exaggerated." "Jamie Andrews," was Harvard historian Lieutenant J. Cutler Andrews, who at the time was writing combat narratives about naval activities off of New Guinea.

## CARRIER STRIKE ON RABAUL, 5 NOVEMBER

The carrier task force assigned the Rabaul strike of 5 November was commanded by Rear Admiral Frederick C. Sherman and was organized as follows:

Carriers:

*Saratoga* (with Air Group 12), Capt. John H. Cassady

*Princeton* (with Air Group 23), Capt. George R. Henderson

*CruDiv 11* (Capt. Lester J. Hudson)

Cruisers:

*San Diego*, Capt. Lester J. Hudson

*San Juan*, Capt. Guy W. Clark

Destroyers:

*Lardner* (F, ComDesRon 12 Comdr. Roger W. Simpson), Lt. Comdr. Otto C. Schatz, Jr.

*Farenholt*, Lt. Comdr. Alcorn G. Beckmann

*Woodworth*, Lt. Comdr. Charles R. Stephen

*Buchanan*, Comdr. Floyd. B Myhre

*Lansdowne* (F, ComDesDiv 24 Comdr. Frank H. Ball), Comdr. Francis J. Foley

*Grayson*, Lt. Comdr. W. Vernon Pratt

*Sterett* (F, ComDesDiv 15, Comdr. Charles J. Stewart), Lt. Comdr. Frank J. Gould

*Stack*, Lt. Comdr. Philip T. Sherman

*Wilson*, Lt. Comdr. Charles K. Duncan

*Edwards*, Lt. Comdr. Paul G. Osler

Task Force Sherman had carried out four air strikes during 1 and 2 November on the enemy airfields at Buka and Bonis for the purpose of neutralizing them during and after our landing at Empress Augusta Bay. After taking aboard planes from the fourth strike on Buka-Bonis, the task force steamed southeast to a point south of Stewart Island. There the force effected a rendezvous with the oiler *Kankakee* and refueled from her 3 and 4 November.

On 4 November Admiral Sherman received orders from ComSoPac to launch an “all-out strike” on shipping at Rabaul. The order of targets was to be cruisers first and destroyers second. These orders were received only 14 hours before the scheduled take-off, when the task force was north and west of Rennell Island proceeding westward. It would therefore require maximum formation speed of about 27 knots to reach the assigned launching position, 220 miles southeast of Rabaul, at the proper time.

The mission was attended by good fortune from the start. Complete absence of engineering casualties permitted the force to maintain the high speed required. The weather proved to be ideal for such an operation. During the night of 4–5 November the ships ran through a moderate weather front and arrived at the launching position in good time with several rain squalls in the vicinity. The squalls were heavy enough to furnish some cover from enemy snoopers, while at the same time not heavy enough to hamper flight operations. The

launching of planes was facilitated by a five to seven knot wind.

Maneuvering on various courses to maintain heading into the wind, the *Saratoga* and *Princeton* began launching planes at 0857 on 5 November. Both ships launched all available planes, the *Saratoga* 33 F6F's, 16 TBF's, and 22 SBD's, and the *Princeton* 7 TBF's and 19 F6F's. The combined striking group, consisting of 52 VF's, 23 VT's, and 22 VB's, completed taking off by 0938 and departed for Rabaul.

Fighter cover for the task force during the absence of its air groups was furnished by carrier aircraft operating ashore from Vella Lavella under Commander Aircraft, Solomons. This cover, which demonstrated the possibilities of coordinated effort between carrier-based and shore-based aircraft, permitted all available fighters from the carriers to accompany the strike as escort. The shore-based cover was reported to be, on the whole, adequate and efficient, although the planes were hampered by bad weather and communications were not altogether satisfactory. During the day, some of the covering planes landed and were serviced aboard the *Saratoga*.

The commander of Bombing Squadron 12 believed that the Rabaul strike was "one of the most rugged jobs ever handed pilots in the South Pacific, and they knew it." Yet with little time for preparation and planning, and no knowledge of the position of targets group and squadron commanders had left the course of approach and retirement indefinite until they were in the air, although they had discussed fully several possible plans. Coordination of the two carrier groups, impossible before the take-off, was arranged on the way to the target by VHF radio, over which the *Saratoga* Group Commander gave the *Princeton* fighters and torpedo planes the probable course of action. He also kept up continuous communication with his bombing and torpedo squadron commanders regarding targets and approach.

The air groups were formed on the dive bombers, which acted as the base squadron, with the torpedo planes in a tight "stepped-down" column of three-plane sections below, and the 52 fighter planes flying low, intermediate, and high cover above. Forty miles from the target fighters began defensive weave tactics. The formation approached Rabaul over St. George's Channel, passed the entrance to the harbor, proceeded along the channel side of Crater Peninsula, then turned left over the peninsula and broke up into sections to descend on the harbor.

Enemy planes at Rabaul evidently received warning of the approach of our striking group, either from coast watchers or by radar, for numerous fighters were airborne to meet the attack.

The sky was almost entirely clear and visibility excellent when at 1050 the attack group arrived over the target area. Forty to fifty ships were seen in the harbor, including ten cruisers and about twenty destroyers, along with tankers, transports, and cargo ships. Some cruisers and destroyers began getting under way just before the attack, and one cruiser escaped attack by speeding out of the harbor. Comdr. Caldwell was under instructions from Admiral Sherman "not to spread his attacks too thin over too many targets, but to concentrate sufficient forces to do serious damage to as many ships, particularly cruisers, as possible." Targets were assigned by radio. The commander of Bombing 12 checked with the commander of Torpedo 12 to see

that there was agreement on targets and that the targets would be hit by dive bombers before the torpedo planes made their runs.

Twelve to fifteen Zekes attacked our formation with small effect during its high-speed approach just before the bombers pushed over. One was shot down. Large numbers of enemy fighters were seen in the area, but were keeping at a safe distance until the formation was split up for attack. The SBD's dived out of column into a blast of antiaircraft fire that came up from the guns of virtually every ship in the harbor and from a formidable ring of shore batteries. The fire was very heavy but fortunately inaccurate in deflection.

The dive bombers, carrying 1,000-pound GP bombs, had some difficulty in locating designated targets in the crowded, unfamiliar harbor. Only about half of the pilots took pictures or had time to think of their cameras. Those pictures that were taken, however, show direct hits on six heavy cruisers, and probable hits on two light cruisers and one destroyer leader. One of the heavy cruisers took three direct hits and two others sustained two hits each.

The direction of the dive, determined by the heading of the ships, forced the bombers to retire through four to six miles of what was described as "perhaps the most concentrated hail of antiaircraft fire ever experienced in a South Pacific action." Pulling out of their dives at low levels, the SBD's had to dodge between and over ships ablaze with antiaircraft, then jink, skid, and change altitude in desperate efforts to avoid the fire.

As soon as the bombers cleared the antiaircraft fire they were set upon by Zeke fighters that attacked "with relentless intensity." Pilots estimated the enemy had between 50 and 75 fighters in the air. The fighter escort had followed the SBD's down and through their dives and retirement, pulling out over the harbor at 3,000 to 4,000 feet with an average speed of 300 knots. Attacking with an altitude advantage and forcing most of the fighting below 4,000 feet, the Zekes kept up pursuit from Simpson Harbor out into St. George's Channel and up to Cape St. George. The running battle turned into a melee, with enemy planes coming in on the bombers from all angles. One SBD was caught alone and shot down by a Zeke. The F6F's avenged this loss by taking a heavy toll of enemy fighters, however, and were able to escort the bombers to safety without further loss. One fighter alone was credited with destroying three Zekes and probably one more. Eight SBD's were shot up by antiaircraft and fighter 20- and 7.7-mm. fire, and three landed aboard the nearest carrier with one fatally and two seriously wounded radiomen. Pilots and radiomen of the squadron, including veterans of Coral Sea and Midway, considered their escape from Rabaul Harbor "miraculous."

In the meantime, the torpedo planes, after delaying and making use of low scattered clouds around the harbor, coordinated their attack to arrive at dropping positions immediately after the dive bombing. The first planes took the leading targets and succeeding ones took targets next in line. The TBF's strafed shore antiaircraft positions during their approach and ships during their retirement. They were loaded with Mark 13, Model I torpedoes fitted with Torpex heads of 600 pounds and set at eight feet.

TBF pilots claimed hits or probable hits on six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and three destroyers. One CA of the *Mogami* class took a hit amidship, followed by a large explosion, and appeared to blow up. Another of the *Tone* class was struck by a torpedo that seemed to lift her stern out of the water. Two CL's that had already been struck by bombs were hit by torpedoes. Many of these targets were also strafed by fighters as

well as torpedo plane gunners.

The last to leave the target area, the TBF's were brought under heavy attack by Japanese fighters that were waiting for them to start their retirement. The enemy concentrated on stragglers and individual planes. Escorted closely by F6F's, the bombers suffered considerable damage but no loss of planes over the target area. The enemy took severe punishment from both the fighters and torpedo plane gunners. Air Group Commander Caldwell paid special tribute to the two .50 caliber fixed guns of his TBF. With his turret out of commission, the gunner wounded, and the photographer dead, he found himself in company with one F6F and eight Zekes. Yet with his forward fixed guns he was able to force one Zeke after another from the tail of the escorting Hellcat, and in an engagement lasting 25 minutes he shot down three and damaged two Zekes.

The last of our planes left the target by 1110. On returning to the carriers, one F6F landed safely aboard the Princeton with its flaps gone, the pilot injured, and more than 200 bullet holes in his machine. The ruggedness of the TBF was attested by the return of one with 109 bullet holes, another with 87 holes, and another with one wheel, no flaps, no aileron, and no radio that landed successfully aboard the *Saratoga*.<sup>2</sup>

Our forces altogether reported 25 enemy planes destroyed, 25 in addition probably destroyed, and nine damaged. Losses in personnel of the attacking group were seven pilots and five crewmen missing, three air crewmen killed, one pilot and seven air crewmen wounded.

Our combat losses in aircraft were:

Lost: 4 F6Fs, 1 SBD, 2 TBF's

Missing: 2 TBF's

Major damage: 4 F6F's, 1 SBD, 2 TBF's

Minor damage: 16 F6F's, 7 SBD's, 7 TBF's

Damage inflicted on surface forces at Simpson Harbor is tabulated as follows.<sup>3</sup>

1 CA 3 bomb hits certain.

1 torpedo hit very probable.

2 CA's 2 bomb hits certain on each.

1 torpedo hit very probable on each.

1 CA 1 bomb hit certain.

2 torpedo hits certain.

2 CA's 1 bomb hit certain on each.

1 torpedo hit certain on each.

2 CL's 1 bomb hit very probable on each.

1 torpedo hit on each.

1 DL 1 bomb hit very probable.

3 DDs 1 torpedo hit certain on each.

<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: The reviewer suggests that the author check this information with J. Cutler Andrews.

<sup>3</sup> Of the heavy cruisers present in the harbor, two were identified as *Nachi* class, two as *Mogami*, three as *Atago*, and one as *Tone* class. There was one each of the *Sendai*, *Yabari*, and *Natori* classes of light cruisers.

This highly effective and bold attack on Rabaul was accomplished with losses far below the number expected and out of all proportion to the damage inflicted upon the enemy. It was believed that five of the heavy cruisers in Simpson Harbor were damaged sufficiently to compel their withdrawal from the South Pacific for major repairs. The attack no doubt prevented, for the time being at least, serious interference with our operations at Empress Augusta Bay. A more remote and possibly more important consequence was the immobilizing of the main elements of the Japanese fleet later in the month for the lack of screening vessels. In the opinion of Commander, Central Pacific Forces, Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, the effect was to prevent any interference with the Gilbert Island Operation which began 20 November, by enemy surface forces.

After recovering aircraft, Task Force Sherman retired immediately to the southeast. It came as somewhat of a surprise that the ships were not attacked by enemy aircraft. The probability was that the Japanese were unable to locate the task force, for when planes of the Fifth Air Force made a strike on Rabaul three hours after the carrier strike that they were intercepted by only 15 enemy fighters. This was interpreted to mean that the main enemy air force was absent and making a vain search for our ships. Task Force Sherman, after an uneventful retirement, moored at Espiritu Santo on 8 November.



## AIR ATTACKS ON THE TOROKINA SUPPLY LINE

While the primary concern of the South Pacific command was with the superior enemy surface forces assembled at Rabaul, a secondary thread of no negligible importance was the air menace to our Torokina supply line. The enemy's air effort increased substantially during the week following the landing on Bougainville in response to the challenge of our advance. Heavy attacks had been made on our ships on the 1st and 2nd, and light attacks were launched at our landing parties and their ships at Choiseul and Mono Islands. A few bombs were dropped on Munda, while enemy planes were reported over West Arundel, Barakoma, and the Russells.

Daily bombing and strafing by shore-based Marine squadrons kept enemy airfields in southern Bougainville area inoperative. By 5 November only one enemy airfield in the whole of the Solomons, that at Bonis on the northern tip of the island, was serviceable, and that only possibly. The threat from planes based at Rabaul still remained, however, and raiding groups flew south almost every night in search of slow-moving convoys or their surface cover.

### TORPEDO ATTACK ON SMALL CRAFT, 5 NOVEMBER

On the afternoon of 5 November, PT 167 and LCI(L) 70 left Cape Torokina escorting LCT 68 to the Treasury Islands. By 1915 the little convoy, sailing on course 205°T., speed seven knots, had reached a position 28 miles southwest of Torokina. The torpedo boat was about 150 yards ahead and the same distance to the port of the LCI, with the LCT nearly 700 yards astern. The sun had set, and it was quite dark in the east with only a little light remaining in the west. The ships were at Condition 2.

Suddenly a flight of twelve planes flying at an altitude of about 200 feet was sighted almost upon the convoy. The enemy formation, consisting of Kate type torpedo planes, split into two groups, eight planes swerving to the right and passing ahead and four boring in directly to attack. The leading plane dived at the PT boat, released a torpedo, and continued directly at the boat, which had opened fire upon it. As the Kate passed over the PT its wing caught on her radio antenna. The plane wobbled a few times and then crashed into the sea. A severe shock felt aboard the PT at the time was later discovered to have been caused by a torpedo entering the boat ten feet abaft her stem and about six feet beneath her deck and passing completely through the boat and out the opposite side without exploding. Holes about six feet by two, with their major axis horizontal, were ripped out of both sides of the boat's hull. Pieces of the torpedo's fin and one of its horizontal rudders were left aboard the PT.

When a second group of planes came in to attack from the west, the PT opened fire again. The 20 mm. gunner on her fantail saw his shots go home into one of the planes, which promptly burst into flames and crashed into the sea so close to the port quarter that men on the stern were drenched by the splash. One man saw a torpedo track cross under the PT's fantail and disappear to the port.

LCI(L) 70 opened fire on the first enemy group with her 40-mm. gun as soon as the exhaust of the planes could be seen with glasses, and then with her 20-mm. and .50 caliber guns at a range of approximately 2,000

yards. The first plane to make a run on the LCI was blazing when she passed over the ship from the port and was finished off by the starboard guns, crashing into the water about 2,500 yards to the starboard. A second plane was shot down about one minute later.

At 1920 two planes came in together, one bearing 230°, the other 260°. Both of these planes were hit, the first bursting into flames and crashing into the sea close on the starboard quarter, while the second continued its flight. The plane shot down dropped a torpedo which struck the ship between frames 91 and 96 at an angle of 45°. The projectile continued into the ship, passing through compartment C-306-A, the bulkheads at frames 91 and 81, and entered the engine room directly above the control desk, skidding over the starboard quad of engines and coming to rest on the catwalk beside the starboard quad on the outboard side. The warhead became dislodged in the process and came to rest in compartment 4.

Five minutes later the last plane came in bearing 270°, and all guns opened fire. The plane crashed into the sea about 5,000 yards off the starboard side of the ship.

After the action it was discovered that there was a hot Japanese torpedo in the engine room, where a minor fire had been started. One man was wounded fatally and another seriously. The fire was quickly extinguished, but it seems that the torpedo continued to run, setting up a dense acid smoke that made survey of damage difficult. All rudder controls had been carried away, and the ship was dead in the water. Orders were given to abandon ship. All personnel including the two casualties were transferred to the damaged PT.

LCT 68, discovered about a mile off, had escaped attack entirely. She agreed to undertake to tow the damaged LCI, and a volunteer work party of two officers and eight men were transferred back aboard the LCI to secure a tow line. Leaving the volunteer crew aboard the LCT, the torpedo boat returned with the remaining survivors to Cape Torokina, arriving there at 2400. LCT 68 with the crippled LCI in tow arrived off Cape Torokina the following morning at 0845. A bomb disposal unit went aboard and soon disarmed the torpedo.

## AIR ATTACK ON SUPPLY ECHELON 2

The second supply echelon to Torokina, a task group under the command of Captain Grayson B. Carter, consisted of the 8 APD's of Transport Divisions 12 and 22, and 8 LST's screened by the *Eaton* (F), with the *Waller*, *Philip*, *Saufley*, *Renshaw*, and *Sigourney*.

The LST's of Task Group Carter with their destroyer screens left Port Purvis about 0530 on 4 November for Cape Torokina. At dawn the following morning these ships made rendezvous south of Simbo Island with 8 APD's, which were placed as an inner anti-air and anti-submarine screen around the LST's. The destroyers took positions as an outer screen around the formation. During the afternoon, at about 1530, the *Apache* joined the group. The vessels proceeded without incident and arrived off the beaching sites at 0700 on 6 November.

Each of the LST's floated a barrage balloon during the passage, the first to be used in the South Pacific. The experiment proved only partially successful, though the balloons continued to be used by subsequent echelons. Maintenance difficulties were thought to overshadow the benefit derived from the balloons as a protection against air attacks.

Unloading the LST's and APD's, begun shortly after arrival, was scheduled to be completed in four hours. The beaches east of Cape Torokina were not satisfactory, however, since the LST's, six of which beached there, were compelled to lower their ramps approximately 60 feet from the shore line in some 30 inches of water. Trucks, jeeps, and cars had their motors drowned out, and unloading was greatly delayed. The beaches on Puruata Island were better, though cooperation of the beach party in the unloading of one LST was poor. Surf became progressively worse at Torokina as the tide came in through the afternoon. Additional delays held up the work until 2320, when the LST was unloaded. The task group was then directed to withdraw and proceed southeast at 6 knots.

LST 70 was unable to retract from the Puruata beach under her own power, however, and the tug Apache was ordered to pull her free. Because the tug fouled her screw in passing a messenger and towing pendant, she was unable to free the LST until 0145. In the meantime, high-level enemy planes dropped bombs along the beach, and the shore batteries opened up. At 0200 another attack developed. Finally pulled free, LST 70 was steaming out of the harbor at 0230, when she was fired upon by shore batteries on Puruata Island, her captain believed, though it may have been the enemy batteries on Bougainville. The batteries continued firing eight minutes hitting the ship with many shrapnel fragments and scoring several near hits.

Enemy planes attacked LST 70 singly or in pairs, beginning about 0245 and continuing until 0425. The planes first dropped parachute flares for illumination, then followed with strafing. The ship was hit several times but no serious damage was inflicted and no casualties caused. The *Eaton*, which accompanied LST 70 was subjected to similar attacks during the same period. At 0615 the two ships rejoined the formation, which arrived at Guadalcanal at 1600 on 8 November.

## TASK FORCE MERRILL ATTEMPTS AN INTERCEPTION

Operation plans for the covering of supply echelons to Cape Torokina during the two weeks following the establishment of the beachhead were made before the highly successful air strike against enemy ships at Rabaul was delivered. Constant danger from air attack was taken for granted, but at that time it was also expected that enemy surface forces from Rabaul would repeat their attempt of the night of 1-2 November, which resulted in the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay and the defeat of the enemy task forces.

Since it was believed that the one cruiser task force in the South Pacific, that commanded by Rear Admiral Aaron S. Merrill, was inadequate surface protection for the supply operations, Cruiser Division 13, commanded by Rear Admiral [Laurence T. DuBose], with *Santa Fe* (F), *Birmingham* and *Mobile* and four ships of Destroyer Division 49, *Harrison*, *John Rodgers*, *McKee*, and *Murray* were detached from the Central Pacific Force on 3 November and ordered to the South Pacific. Admiral DuBose's force proceeded from the New Hebrides area to Port Purvis, from which it operated under Commander South Pacific Force on a temporary basis. This force and Task Force Merrill alternated as surface support for supply echelons moving to and from Cape Torokina until the former was detached and ordered to return to the Central Pacific Force.

With the *Denver* immobilized temporarily for repair of battle damage and the *Foote* disabled, Task Force Merrill was composed as follows:

CruDiv 12, Rear Admiral Merrill, Com. Task Forces

*Montpelier* (FF), Capt. Robert G. Tobin

*Cleveland*, Capt. Andrew G. Shepard

*Columbia*, Capt. Frank E. Beatty

*Nashville*, Capt. Herman A. Spanagel

DesDiv 45, Capt. Arleigh A. Burke, ComDesRon 23

*Charles F. Ausburne* (F), Comdr. Luther K. Reynolds

*Dyson*, Comdr. Roy A. Gano

*Stanly*, Comdr. Robert W. Cavenagh

*Claxton*, Comdr. Herald F. Stout

DesDiv 46, Comdr. Bernard L. Austin

*Spence* (F), Comdr. Henry J. Armstrong, Jr.

*Converse*, Comdr. Dewitt C. E. Hamberger

This task force had arrived at Port Purvis on 3 November after four engagements with enemy forces—surface, air, and land, during 31 October–2 November. Personnel spent that day and the next in hurried attempts to repair battle damage while the ships refueled and replenished their ammunition. While thus engaged, Admiral Merrill received from Commander Third Fleet, Admiral Halsey, instructions to depart from Port Purvis on 4 November to provide cover for the supply echelon moving to Cape Torokina, Bougainville.

Personnel of the covering force were kept at the General Quarters throughout the night of 5–6 November by the continuous harassing of enemy planes. Only by constant maneuver and by taking under fire every snooper that approached the formation, were casualties avoided. One stick of bombs was dropped near the *Spence* without harm to the ship or her personnel. During the daylight hours of 6 November Task Force Merrill retired in the direction of the Treasury Island. There Admiral Merrill received a report of the success of the air strike on Rabaul of the previous day. In view of this good news he detached the *Nashville*, *Cleveland*, *Spence*, *Converse*, and *Stanly* and ordered them to refuel at Hathorn Sound during the night.

The remaining ships of the force—the *Montpelier* and *Columbia*, with the *Ausburne*, *Dyson*, and *Claxton*—proceeded to the covering station northwest of Empress Augusta Bay at dark to await the retirement of the Second Echelon of supply ships from Torokina. Snoopers harassed the force almost continuously, as they had the previous night, and several were fired upon.

At 0059 on 7 November the task force received the following contact report from a Black Cat: “This is my first report. This force 7 ships, 2 light cruisers, 5 destroyers. Latitude 5–50, Longitude 154–15, course 200, true speed 25 knots.” This placed the enemy about 50 miles northwest of Cape Torokina. Apparently the stage was set for a return engagement with the enemy at the site of the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay, which occurred just one week before.

Admiral Merrill immediately changed course to 300° T., to intercept the enemy, increased speed to 25 knots, and deployed the three destroyers in column ahead of the cruisers. He then sent a dispatch to the convoy of supply ships, directing that the destroyers of that task group be concentrated on bearing northwest of the convoy in a defensive position, and that the convoy proceed at best speed to the Treasury Islands. He also directed the two cruisers and three destroyers that had been detached for refueling (200 miles away at this time) to proceed at best speed north of Kolombangara and south of Treasury Islands, to make rendezvous with the supply ship convoy on its retirement course.

A night fighter attached to the task force was vectored to the position the enemy was predicted to reach at 0200 with instructions to search the area from this point to that of the original contact. A Black Cat also assigned to the force was directed to search from Empress Augusta Bay to the northwest along the shore line for 40 miles and thence to the west and south. Admiral Merrill's force conducted a modified retiring search, making full use of the 20-mile SG radar, over an area as large as it was expedient considering the primary mission of the force, which was the protection of the convoy.

Unfortunately, no further contact with the enemy force was established. At first it was believed that the Black Cat, subsequently reported missing, had mistaken Admiral Merrill's force for an enemy force—the number and type of ships being the same. It was learned the next day, however, that one of our planes had sighted two enemy light cruisers and five destroyers entering St. George Channel early on the morning of 7 November. It was concluded that the original contact reported by the Black Cat was not a mistake, and that the enemy had escaped because of the lack of the information concerning his movements.

The part of the Admiral Merrill's force that had refuelled joined up at 0952 on 7 November northwest of Treasury Islands. That afternoon at 1700, west of Simbo Island, Task Force Merrill fell in with Cruiser Division 13, which had been sent to relieve it of covering duties. Task Force Merrill then retired to Port Purvis.

## AIR ATTACK ON ECHELON 2A

Supply Echelon 2A organized as a task unit under the command of Capt. Anton B. Anderson, departed Guadalcanal for Cape Torokina at 0103 on 7 November. Task Unit Anderson was organized as follows:

### Transport Division 2, Capt. Anderson

*President Jackson* (APA) (FF), Capt. Elmer P. Abernethy  
*President Adams* (APA), Capt. Felix L. Johnson  
*President Hayes* (APA), Capt. Henry C. Flanagan  
*Fuller* (APA), Capt. Melville E. Eaton  
*Libra* (AKA), Comdr. Floyd F. Ferris  
*Titania* (AKA), Comdr. Herbert E. Berger

### Destroyer Squadron 45, Comdr. Ralph Earle, Jr.

*Guest* (F), Lt. Comdr. Earle K. McLaren  
*Wadsworth*, Comdr. John F. Walsh  
*Warrington*, Lt. Comdr. Robert A. Dawes, Jr.

*Anthony* (ComDesDiv 90, Comdr. Edmund B. Taylor), Lt. Comdr. Blinn Van Mater  
*Hudson*, Comdr. William R. Smedburg, III  
*Bennett*, Lt. Comdr. Phillip F. Hauck

Mine Squadron 2, Comdr. Wayne R. Loud  
*Hopkins* (F), Lieut. Alton L. Waldron  
*Hovey*, Lt. Comdr. Edwin A. McDonald  
*Southard*, Lt. Comdr. Frederick R. Matthews  
*Dorsey*, Lt. Comdr. Archibald E. Teall

The *Wadsworth* was primary fighter director ship and the *Bennett* secondary fighter director. Embarked in the APA's and AKA's were the troops of the 148th Combat Team, special troops of the 37th Division, 3rd Branch of the 4th Base Depot, and Battery D, 70th Coast Artillery (AA), together with their equipment and supplies. Mine Squadron 2, acting as part of the screen, was assigned the mission of making soundings of uncharted shoals off Cape Torokina.

At about 1800 on 7 November, Admiral DuBose's force of cruisers and destroyers having relieved Task Force Merrill as covering force for supply echelons, took station approximately ten miles to the northwest of the convoy and remained in this relative position throughout the night.

At 2002 ComDiv Div 90 in the *Anthony* with the *Hudson* was ordered to proceed ahead of the convoy at maximum speed to intercept and destroy enemy barge traffic in the vicinity of Cape Torokina. At 0105 the next morning, while entering Empress Augusta Bay the two destroyers were attacked by a low-flying plane identified as a B-24. The Liberator, about the identification of which there was no doubt, dropped a stick of bombs close aboard the *Anthony* from an altitude of about 500 feet. Every known means for identifying themselves as friendly was used by the destroyers, but after Liberator had dropped another stick of bombs, this time 25 yards off the port bow of the *Hudson*, and machine-gunned the *Anthony*, patience was exhausted. The destroyers opened up with their 40 mm. guns and drove the Liberator away. Several .50 caliber bullet holes in the *Anthony* was the only damage suffered.

While approaching Cape Torokina at 0315 a surface target was located by radar on the *Anthony*, which fired star shells and identified the target as an enemy barge. She then opened fire with her main batteries, but when the target increased speed to 20 knots she ceased fire, realizing the target was not an enemy barge but two of our PT boats. Since the PT's could be heard faintly over our TBS preparing to counterattack, the destroyers turned to clear the area. Voice communication was established with the PT boats which reported no damage from the gunfire, but admitted later that the shooting was "pretty good." No enemy barges were located during the night. The *Anthony* and *Hudson* rejoined their convoy off Torokina about 0630.

At 0850 the transports arrived at the unloading area off the Torokina beaches, anchored heading seaward, and began the debarkation of troops and unloading of supplies. The screening vessels were disposed to the seaward, south and southwest of the debarkation area. A division of our fighters was on station over Torokina at 0610. The *Wadsworth* reported bogies in the distance intermittently throughout the morning, but none of them closed the transports.

At 1140 the *Wadsworth* discovered many bogies bearing 260°T., distance 56 miles. The fighter director aboard the *Wadsworth* vectored out the air cover, which at that time consisted of 12 F4U's and 16 F6F's. Twelve additional fighters reported on station during the subsequent attack.

Capt. Anderson ordered all ships to prepare to get underway immediately upon report of contact with the bogies and cautioned them to maneuver independently if the unit was attacked before it had cleared the restricted waters and shoals near the unloading area. The APA's and AKA's formed two sections with the *President Adams* as guide of the right section, followed by the *Libra* and *President Jackson*; the left section guide was the *President Hayes*, which was followed by the *Titania* and *Fuller*.

At 1153 the fighters reported a tallyho on an enemy group made up of 60 to 70 planes. Four minutes later the *Wadsworth* informed the ships that the raid was bearing 200°T., distance 15 miles, altitude between 18,000 and 20,000 feet. At 1203 the transports began a series of emergency simultaneous turns. They were still in restricted waters between shoals, when the attack began and therefor were embarrassed for space in which to maneuver.

At 1205 the destroyers, followed quickly by the transports, opened fire upon 20 to 30 Vals approaching the ships from an altitude of between 8,000 and 10,000 feet. The Vals attacked out of the sun at an angle of about 40° in small groups from all along the port side of the task unit, dropping 500-pound bombs or strings of smaller bombs. The APA's and AKA's were persistently dive-bombed, especially the two rear ships, *Fuller* and *President Jackson*. Each of these two vessels sustained one direct hit and several near hits.

A 500-pound bomb struck the *Fuller*, ricocheted off the barrel of her No. 4 3-inch gun, passed through the gun platform deck and main deck, and exploded in the upper No. 7 hold. The explosion severed all power and light cables, telephone, sanitary and freshwater lines, ruptured the service steam line aft, and started many small fires in the crew quarters.<sup>4</sup> Fires were quickly extinguished, and the work of clearing away wreckage and re-establishing services was begun.

After scoring two near hits, the Japanese planes dropped one bomb on the *President Jackson*. The bomb proved to be a dud weighing about 550 pounds. It caused some slight damage to superstructure before it struck the No. 4 hatch cover, which it penetrated and came to rest on the deck below. Five men were required to roll the bomb over the side.

An attack by torpedo planes developed about five minutes after the dive bomber retired. Twelve or fourteen Nells (or Bettys) came in about 50 feet off the water and were taken under fire. Two of them blew up, one about 7,000 yards and one about 4,000 yards from the *President Jackson*. The nearer plane evidently took a direct 5-inch hit from the destroyer screen. The three planes following it turned away immediately and disappeared without pressing home their attack. Several other Bettys were also discouraged by our gunfire and turned away before landing their projectiles. Several torpedoes were launched, one of which was seen to pass astern of the transport formation, but no hits were made. The prompt and effective anti-aircraft fire of the destroyer

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<sup>4</sup> Shrapnel also carried away all rigging at No. 7 hatch, wrecked the port steam capstan, and pierced the sick bay bulkhead in numerous places, temporarily paralyzing operating and sterilizing facilities. The main radio antenna was cut away.

screen was credited with breaking up the torpedo attack, which carried greater potential danger than the dive bombers.

The attack ended about 1215, when the remaining planes withdrew to the northwest. At 1235 the *Wadsworth* reported no planes within a range of 60 miles, and the task unit then returned to the unloading area to continue putting troops and supplies ashore.

Antiaircraft guns of the ships shot down seven planes, mainly Vals. The fighters of the air cover, which intercepted the enemy force and did most of its work out of sight of the task unit, reported shooting down eleven Zekes, thirteen Vals, and two other planes, and probably destroying seventeen additional planes. Eight planes of our air cover were lost. Six men were killed and nineteen wounded aboard the *Fuller*, one man was wounded by strafing aboard the *Libra*, while no casualties were sustained by the *President Jackson*.

Unloading was again interrupted at 1559 when the fighter director ship reported a few bogies at a distance of 27 miles closing at 200 knots. The task unit got underway again, but by 1636 the screen was clear of bogies, and the ships returned, resuming unloading at 1722. By 1830, when a third set of bogies appeared on the screen of the *Wadsworth*, contact had been established with the surface covering force of cruisers under Admiral DuBose. Capt. Anderson decided that it was best to retire under the protection of a torrential downpour of rain that began about that time.

The task unit got underway at 1840 in the midst of the storm. Many bogies continued in the vicinity, approaching once to within 25 miles. Believing that the enemy planes were lying in wait until the task unit left the protection of the rain storm, Capt. Anderson slowed to two-thirds speed with the intention of remaining under the weather front until the enemy gave up pursuit or ran low on fuel. The maneuver proved successful, since the planes eventually abandoned the convoy and turned instead to attack the cruisers of the covering force.

Throughout the night the task unit was shadowed by snoopers. At 0105 on 9 November, Cruiser Division 13, then ten miles off the task unit's starboard quarter, opened fire on enemy aircraft. The convoy went to General Quarters. Some of the destroyers of the screen took planes under fire without observing results, but no planes approached closer than three miles and no further attack was made upon the task unit, although several colored flares were dropped. At 0243 a Ventura night fighter arrived on station and quickly drove all snoopers away. The convoy continued without further misadventure and came to anchor of Bungana Island at 0114, 10 November.

## AIR ATTACK ON CRUISER DIVISION 13

The force under command of Admiral DuBose, which provided surface cover for the convoy operation described above, was organized as follows:

Cruiser Division 13, Admiral DuBose  
*Santa Fe* (FF), Capt. Russell S. Berkey

*Birmingham*, Capt. Thomas B. Inglis

*Mobile*, Capt. C. Julian Wheeler

Destroyer Division 49, Comdr. Edward M. Thompson

*John Rodgers*, Comdr. Herman O. Parish

*Harrison*, Comdr. Carl M. Dalton

*McKee*, Comdr. John J. Greytak

*Murray*, Comdr. Paul R. Anderson

When this force made rendezvous with Task Force Merrill north of Simbo Island at 1745 on 7 November, the flagship *Santa Fe* took aboard Admiral Merrill's operation officer and communication officer as liaison with the task force which was being relieved. At the same time Admiral Merrill's fighter director officer reported for similar temporary duty aboard the *Mobile*, which was the fighter director ship of Admiral Du Bose's force. The radar of the flagship was unhappily inoperative throughout the succeeding operation, a deficiency which greatly handicapped the officer in tactical command during the air action the following night.

Cruiser Division 13 and its destroyer screen continued on northwestern courses during the night of 7-8 November, covering Task Unit Anderson on its way to Cape Torokina. During the daylight hours of the following day the covering force patrolled to the west and northwest of Treasury Islands, ready to interpose itself between the convoy and any enemy surface craft. It was the intention of the Admiral to steam north only in time to arrive southwest of Empress Augusta Bay by nightfall. At 1700, however, a dispatch was received from the commander of the convoy at Cape Torokina saying that a fighter pilot had reported three large ships to the west of the transport group. It was believed at the time that the pilot must have mistaken Cruiser Division 13 for enemy ships and reported them as such. Having no means of verifying this suspicion, however, Admiral DuBose set course to the north at once to intercept the reported ships should they actually materialize. Instead of arriving southwest of Empress Augusta Bay at dark, therefore, the cruisers arrived during daylight. Their position at 1800 was 67 miles bearing 297° T. from the Treasury Islands.

The weather, generally speaking, was clear, although there were numerous rain squalls to the west. The wind was from the south-southeast, force 2, the sea calm, and visibility unlimited except in squalls.

During the afternoon between 1200 and 1800 some 13 bogies were reported on the radar screens of the *Mobile* and *Birmingham*, and between 1610 and 1640 the force had an air alert and assumed an antiaircraft disposition. Bogies closed to within 15 miles, but did not attack. As expected, no surface contact was made. At 1814 radar indications of enemy planes to the west were picked up and observed to close gradually until 1840 when a snooper was sighted. The *Mobile* and *Santa Fe* opened fire at a range of 14,000 yards.

In the meantime, an antiaircraft defense disposition was ordered. The sun set at 1831 and darkness quickly fell, greatly increasing the probability of attack. Late in the afternoon, in time for the planes to reach their bases before dark, the fighter cover over Torokina was withdrawn. A night fighter had been assigned Cruiser Division 13, but the fighter's base reported the plane unable to locate the ships—nor did the plane establish contact with the cruisers until the early hours of the following morning.

At 1845 the combat information center of *Mobile* picked up a large bogey some 60 miles to the northwest. It was soon apparent that this time it was not snoopers and that a large attack was developing, though it was somewhat slow in closing. Speed of the formation was increased during the next ten minutes to 29 knots. While the first large bogey circled to approach the formation from the northeast, a second was picked up at 1903 closing from some 60 miles to the northwest. The first bogey split first into two groups and then into a large number of groups to make the attack from numerous directions—northwest, north, and northeast. The second bogey employed the same tactics.

Admiral DuBose had set course toward the northwest in an effort to take advantage of a heavy rain squall in that direction, but before the cover of the squall was reached the air attack began in earnest. Thereafter the ships were maneuvered radically, with frequent changes of speed and course ordered over TBS, the course being maintained in the general direction of the rain squall. Just before the attack opened enemy snoopers dropped a string of four white float lights and flares of various colors 10 to 12 miles off the starboard quarter along the line of advance to outline the ships for the bombers.

The first attack wave came in at 1903, approaching at an altitude of 2,000 to 3,000 feet and gliding gradually to their torpedo-dropping or skip bombing altitude. The attack was pressed home aggressively from masthead height, although after the first wave no more than two planes came in simultaneously. It was estimated that between 24 and 30 aircraft, mainly torpedo planes, took part in the attack. The only ones that could be seen clearly enough to be identified were three Bettys and one Val.

The cruisers opened fire at long ranges with their 6-inch guns, while the lesser batteries of cruisers and destroyers joined in soon afterward. The 5-inch guns, fired by radar control, experienced difficulty from mistaking cloud “pips” for planes in the squally weather. It was found that 40-mm. tracers lighted up a large area and had to be fired in short bursts to reduce this effect. During the heaviest phase of the attack, between 1915 and 1924, lookout officers aboard the *Birmingham* counted six planes shot down and burning in the water at one time—two on the port quarter and four to the starboard. At least one other plane was shot down in flames and probably other were destroyed that did not burn. Fire discipline was pronounced good and firing was quite effective in this the first antiaircraft action the majority of these ships had experienced.

At 1917 machine gunners of the *Birmingham* took under fire a plane coming in very low from the clouds on the starboard quarter. This plane, identified as a Val with retractable landing gear, was shot down, striking the water and burning fiercely less than 1,000 yards on the port beam. The Val’s bomb was released before the plane was hit, however, and struck the *Birmingham*’s starboard side at about frame 149. The ship was holed at frames 147 and 149 from ten feet above the water line to the bottom of the hull.<sup>5</sup>

About one minute after the first hit, the ship was jarred by an explosion forward that flung water up over the open bridge. No plane was seen or heard in the immediate vicinity of the ship at this time. The explosion, apparently caused by a torpedo, occurred on the port bow at frame 20, holing the ship from four feet above to ten feet below the water line and flooding all compartments on the third deck and below between frames 15

<sup>5</sup> The compartments on the first platform and below from frame 144 to the stern were flooded. The hangar hatch was blown up and over the catapult, destroying plane crane machinery and damaging the crane, both catapults, elevator machinery, and hatch-closing mechanisms.

and 29, except the No. 1 barbette and one other compartment.

Shortly before the attack ended a plane started a run from port on the destroyer just ahead of the *Birmingham*, but when a few hundred yards from the destroyer he swung to his right and made a long loop to start a run on the cruiser from the port beam. He was taken under heavy automatic weapon fire at short range by the *Birmingham*, exploded over the ship, and plummeted into the water not more than 100 yards on her starboard beam. His bomb was either released by or just before the explosion. It struck and detonated on the face plate of turret No. 4, gouging the guns in many places, and knocking off nuts and other fittings inside the turret. A tremendous flash was produced in the turret, which was promptly sprinkled, but no explosion occurred.

In spite of the severe damage inflicted by these three hits, a preliminary inspection revealed that the ship was riding easily, still in its fighting trim, and capable of making speed up to 28 knots. All radar, fire control, and communication gear was in full commission, as were also the engineering plant and, with the exception of turret No. 4, the ship's battery. The ship sustained 33 casualties, only one of which resulted in death.

At about 1945 the formation entered the rain squall toward which it had been maneuvering since the beginning of the attack. This marked an end to the first attack of the night and the retirement of the remaining planes. The *Birmingham*, which was the only ship sustaining damage of the attack, took the rear position in the cruiser column after the formation had slowed to 20 knots. While under cover of the squall, the formation reversed course and during the next four hours maneuvered on various courses to take position approximately ten miles west of the transport convoy, which was steaming on a southwesterly course below the Treasury Islands.

From the end of the first air attack until the beginning of the second at 0105, 9 November, snoopers were constantly on the radar screen of the *Mobile*. They kept at a respectful distance for the most part, however, and were fired upon only twice.

At 0057 the combat information center of the *Mobile* reported two bogies, one bearing 270° at 12 miles, the other bearing 190° at 14 miles. Admiral DuBose ordered an emergency ships left to 090°, set Condition 1, formed the antiaircraft disposition, and increased speed to 25 knots. Fire was opened at 0105. By the illumination of the burst of the first salvo four Bettys were identified. A few minutes later a plane dove out of a cloud ahead of the formation and made an approach on the *Mobile*. Both she and the *Birmingham* opened fire on the plane, which dropped what seemed to be a torpedo at very close range to the *Mobile* and crashed in the water after passing over her. The *Mobile* avoided the projectile by means of a full left rudder. Shortly after this a second plane was sighted coming down the formation to the starboard on an opposite parallel course. This plane was set afire by hits and burned in level flight for perhaps a half minute before it crashed.

The rest of the action, which lasted until about 0300, consisted of individual sneak attacks. One plane would come in to a range of about 12,000 yards to divert attention while another would attack from a different direction. Some nine or ten targets were taken under fire during this phase. Meanwhile many flares were dropped around the formation. By means of emergency turns ordered over TBS, the ships were maneuvered

successfully so as to avoid any further hits. At about 0300 all enemy planes except snoopers withdrew to the north, and soon afterward the arrival of the night fighter assigned the force frightened away the snoopers. Condition 1-Easy was set at 0320.

Since it was necessary to reduce speed because of the *Birmingham*'s condition, that ship was ordered to join the transport group at 0947, 9 November. The remaining ships then proceeded to Purvis Bay in accordance with orders.

## SECOND AIR STRIKE ON RABAUL 11 NOVEMBER 1943

### APPROACH AND LAUNCHING

In answer to a request from ComSoPac for additional support, CinCPac dispatched to the South Pacific a carrier force commanded by Rear Admiral Alfred E. Montgomery which included the *Essex*, *Bunker Hill*, and *Independence*. With these ships, those of Task Force Sherman, and all available heavy bombers from the land bases of the Northern Solomons, Admiral Halsey planned a coordinated air strike on Rabaul for the morning of 11 November. According to the plan, the planes of Task Force Sherman were to strike first at about 0800 and those of Task Group Montgomery at about 0930. The carrier-based planes were to be followed by the land-based heavy bombers of ComAirSoPac, and later by medium bombers from SoWesPac to make a "clean up" strike from low altitude at 1100.

The order of targets was: cruisers, destroyers, tankers, and merchant shipping. It was hoped that the brilliant success of the air strike of 5 November might be repeated. The coordinated strike of 11 November was part of a general offensive against surface forces and shipping at Rabaul. In preparation for the carrier action, air forces of ComSoPac neutralized the enemy airfields in the Bougainville area and 10 planes from SoWesPac attacked Rabaul airfields on 9 November and again on the following day. The latter strikes did not prove very effective.

When the order for the strike of 11 November was received, Task Force Sherman was at Espiritu Santo fueling, replenishing planes, and taking on provisions and ammunition. For this action the task force consisted of *Saratoga* (ComTaskFor) with Air Group 12, *Princeton* with Air Group 23, *San Diego* (ComCruDiv 11), *San Juan*, *Farenholt* (ComDesRon 12), *Grayson* (ComDesDiv 24), *Woodworth*, *Lansdowne*, *Lardner*, and *Buchanan*.

Task Force Sherman stood out to sea from Espiritu Santo on the morning of 9 November and proceeded up to the eastern side of the Solomons, arriving at the launching position at 0530 on 11 November. This position, latitude 04° 54' S., longitude 155° 44' E., was about 30 miles east of Buka Island and 225 miles from Rabaul. The Princeton launched an attack group of 9 VT and 20 VF. It required more than two hours for the *Saratoga* to launch her air group, which consisted of 36 VF's, 23 VB's, and 15 VT's. This delay was caused by the light and variable winds encountered at the launching position, and by the speed of the *Saratoga*'s one operative elevator which required approximately two minutes for a round trip. Some 48 minutes were thus required to bring the 24 planes on the hangar deck to the flight deck, and an additional delay of about 20 minutes was caused by duds in the launching spot. It was 0740 before the combined *Saratoga-Princeton* air group was airborne and on its way to Rabaul.

In the meantime, Task Group Montgomery had sortied from Espiritu Santo at 1600 on 8 November. The task force organization was as follows:

Carriers:

*Essex* (FF), Capt. Ralph A. Ofstie  
Air Group 9, Comdr. Paul E. Emrick  
*Bunker Hill*, Capt. [John] J. Ballentine  
Air Group 17 (VFO), Comdr. Michael P. Bagdanovich  
*Independence*, Capt. Rudolf L. Johnson  
Air Group 22, Comdr. James M. Peters

Destroyers:

*Bullard*, Lt. Comdr. Bernard W. Freund  
*Edwards* Lt. Comdr. Paul G. Osler  
*Stack*, Lt. Comdr. Philip T. Sherman  
*Chauncey*, Lt. Comdr. Lester C. Conwell  
*Sterett* (F, ComDesDiv 15, Comdr. Charles J. Stuart), Lt. Cmdr. Frank J. Gould  
*Wilson*, Lt. Comdr. Charles K. Dunkin  
*Kidd*, Comdr. Allan B. Roby  
*McKee*, Comdr. John J. Greytak  
*Murray*, Comdr. Paul R. Anderson

Task Group Montgomery proceeded via latitude 13° 35' S., longitude 160° 00'E., to latitude 12° 00' S., longitude 158° 00 E., arriving at the latter point at 1800 on 10 November. From that point the group began a high-speed approach toward the launching point which was about 600 miles west of Bougainville and 226 miles from Rabaul in latitude 07° 00' S., longitude 154° 30' E.

Air groups from the three carriers were launched simultaneously beginning at 0647. Surface wind at the launching point was 060° at nine knots, persisting through the launching period. The *Essex* attack group was made up of 19 VT's, 28 VB's, and 29 VF's and in addition 8 VF's launched as a combat air patrol. The *Bunker Hill* launched 19 FT's, 23 VB's, and 27 VF's, as an attack group and 4 VB's for intermediate air patrol and 7 VF as combat air patrol. The attack group launched by the *Independence* consisted of 9 VT's escorted by 16 VF's. Eight VF's were retained on board to serve as additional CAP if needed. The combined attack group from the three carriers was made up of 56 VT's, 51 VB's, and 72 VF's. One operational casualty occurred when a Helldiver of Squadron 17 in taking off from *Bunker Hill* crashed into the sea off the starboard bow, probably as the result of engine failure. The pilot was lost, but the rear-seat man was picked up. Launching of all attack groups was completed by 0745, only five minutes after the Task Force Sherman, on the other side of the Solomon Islands, had completed launching its group.

Although the original plan intended that the planes of Task Force Montgomery should arrive over the target an hour and a half after those of Task Force Sherman, the launching time altered the timing of the strikes drastically. The delay in launching the planes of the *Saratoga* and *Princeton* made them an hour late in arriving over the target, while the planes of the *Essex*, *Bunker Hill*, and *Independence* arrived at Rabaul half an hour early. As a result, the attack group of the former task force arrived in the vicinity of Rabaul about 0900, only five minutes before the attack group from Task Group Montgomery.

Information that about 184 Japanese fighter planes were in the Rabaul area had been received shortly before our attack groups were launched. It was evident that the limited strikes by planes of ComSoWesPac on the two days prior to the carrier-based strike had not seriously reduced the air defenses of the enemy base. Whether the enemy fighters were airborne in large numbers or not, however, our first air group was not heavily attacked.

## STRIKE BY PLANES OF TASK FORCE SHERMAN

The dive bombers acted as base squadron for the formation of 72 planes of the *Saratoga-Princeton* air groups, flying a close stepped-up "V" of divisions with the torpedo planes in a stepped-down column of three-plane sections. Fighter planes flew high, intermediate, and low cover. The attack group levelled off at 13,000 feet and increased speed to 150 knots when the target was sighted 30 miles distant. Two SBD's in the meantime were forced back by engine trouble. The approach was from the southeast over the south end of New Ireland and directly into Rabaul Harbor. There was no enemy interception previous to the bombing attack.

When these same squadrons had made their highly successful attack on the same area on 5 November the harbor was spread out in brilliant sunshine under their bomb sights. On the second strike their luck changed for most of the harbor was obscured by clouds and nearby rain squalls offered convenient umbrage for targets. The enemy had evidently received warning of the attack, since several small warships were seen racing out of Blanche Bay toward rain squalls and at first no cruisers at all were sighted. The bombing squadron commander sighted one DL steaming at high speed toward a squall east of Praed Point and another ship also at high speed in the clear south of the squall which he first took for a CL, but which photographs later showed to be a DL of the *Terutsuki* class. The squadron commander assigned the first target to nine SBD's and the second to the remaining twelve.

The dive bombers pushed over at 10,000 feet. The target of the nine-plane attack was maneuvering violently and entering the squall as the bombers closed in. Diving conditions were described as "virtually impossible." On account of the squall no hits were scored, and the attack was a failure. Although the *Terutsuki* destroyer was maneuvering violently, she was in the open and presented a better target. One hit with a 1,000-pound bomb was scored just aft of amidships at about the position of the torpedo tubes. Pictures also indicate a probable hit on the starboard bow and four near hits at that point which may have caused damage. The ship continued at high speed in spite of these hits. Only slight, inaccurate antiaircraft fire was encountered from the two ships attacked.

One division of the torpedo planes coordinated their attack with the dive bombers attacking the *Terutsuki*. The TBF's released eight torpedoes at 1,200 to 1,500 yards, 250 to 300 feet altitude. Fighter pilots covering the division believed they saw two explosions on this target. A second division of TBF's coordinated their attack with that of the nine bombers and reported one probable hit on their DL target. In addition, the torpedo squadron reported one possible hit on each of two destroyers.

Since heavy attacks from enemy fighters were expected, the groups had planned to concentrate as much as

possible on two or three targets and then to retired after a quick rendezvous. The F6F's formed an umbrella over the bombers as they retired low over the main harbor outlet and to the south along St. George's Channel. The only combat involving fighters occurred in the Channel near the Credner Islands, where four or five Zekes pressed home an attack on several TBF's. Our fighters destroyed one Zeke, which crashed in flames, and probably damaged others. The attack groups made a 360° turn off Cape St. George in order to pick up stragglers and then returned to the carriers at an altitude of 1,500 to 3,000 feet.

Considering damage inflicted our losses were light. Only one pilot and two crewmen were reported missing. The port wing and engine of an F6F were so severely damaged by a Zeke that the Hellcat pilot was compelled to parachute upon returning to the task force. He was picked up uninjured by a destroyer. One TBF was reported missing, one suffered major damage, two minor damage and two F6F's also sustained minor damage. There were no operational casualties.

## STRIKE OF PLANES OF TASK GROUP MONTGOMERY

Flying in tight formation at an altitude of 12,000 feet, the air group of Task Force Montgomery approached the target on course 314.5° T. About 40 miles from the target, enemy fighters of the Zeke type were first observed trailing the formation from above and also on the beams. The Zekes remained at a safe distance, neither attacking nor making any passes. Our fighters flew a low cover formation, with planes weaving across the group from time to time and keeping a close watch on the enemy fighters overhead, which were evidently biding their time until the formation broke up to attack. It is thought that the enemy fighters directed antiaircraft fire to our planes, however, since the flak was especially accurate before and during the dive.

## ESSEX GROUP

The planes of the *Essex*, Air Group 9 (Comdr. Paul E. Emrick), attacked first. They found the target about four-fifths covered by clouds but visibility good, and spotted several warships maneuvering violently and in various stages of making their escape seaward.

Targets sighted were two CA's, three CL's, two DD's, and 2 AK's. The bombers began to peel off for their dives at approximately 13,000 feet, each division with its assigned escort of fighters. Enemy fighters were still keeping a safe distance. Eight SBD's dived on a heavy cruiser that was executing a fast circular turn south of Sulphur Point. They scored one hit on their port beam and several near hits. Another division of five bombers attacked a light cruiser standing out to sea south of Matupi Island, scoring one hit on her bow and several near hits. One pilot broke away from his division and dived on a target he identified as a light cruiser south of Praed Point. This ship, presumably one of the targets of the *Saratoga* planes a few minutes earlier, was on fire amidships. She was hit again by the single SBD, this time on her port quarter.

The fighter divisions had circled over their assigned bombers until the last SBD had pushed over, then tailed them down in the dive. Following through to the bottom of the dive, the strafed targets of opportunity consisting of two merchantmen and the dock area along Karavia Bay. One of the fighter divisions became

detached from its assigned bombers while passing through a rain squall, but the others escorted the bombers out on the retirement.

The torpedo squadron was prevented by a rain squall from swinging around the target to attack from the northeast. Instead they passed directly over Simpson Harbor on a northwest course, losing altitude, then by means of a 180° diving turn, approached the targets over the low ground northwest of the harbor. They encountered fairly accurate and heavy AA fire both from ships and shore batteries while over the harbor, but were not attacked by fighters, probably because their speed was 300 knots and their formation close. The TBF's positively identified as to type three CA's and several DD's accompanying them. They also saw gun flashes beyond these ships to the eastward in the rain, where it was thought the more important targets were located. Attack signal was given and the divisions broke up, the sections entering the rain squall on a southeasterly course, remaining in close formation until on the dropping course.

The first section made a run on a heavy cruiser, but blinded by rain so heavy that it took the paint off the leading edges of the elevator surfaces, the pilots passed directly over the target at 150 feet without dropping torpedoes. They made a 180° turn to the left and on the return sighted a *Tenryu* or *Natori* class light cruiser dead ahead. One torpedo was dropped on radar range of 800 yards, and a large blast followed, accompanied by much debris. The ship was dead in the water when last seen. Another TBF, having lost the section leader in the squall, came through the rain and sighted a destroyer just north of Mt. Turanguna about a quarter of a mile off shore on a northerly course. All three crew members saw their torpedo hit amidships on the port side and then saw the ship roll over on its port side. A third plane which also lost the section leader, turned around to the left and sighted a heavy cruiser, probably the one passed up on entering the squall. The torpedo was dropped at about 700 yards, and the crew saw a large flash when the projectile hit the starboard side of the cruiser.

The second section entered the squall with a run on the same heavy cruiser that the first section had passed over, but pulled up and over the target after running into the same difficulties. The section leader, after losing both wing men in the rain, made three runs through the squall but was unable to find the cruiser again. Instead he launched his torpedo at a destroyer, though he was unable to observe results. One of the wing men launched his torpedo at a light cruiser of the *Natori* or *Tenryu* class, but was also prevented from observing results by the driving rain. Both of these planes were subjected to ineffective attacks by single Japanese fighters which retired when their fire was returned. The third plane of this section joined the third section in an attack upon a heavy cruiser of the *Mogami* class just inside the squall about two miles northeast of Cape Tawui making approximately five knots. The pilots saw all four of their torpedoes converging on the target but were unable to see results because of the rain. Two fighters covering the section saw only one explosion near the fantail of the cruiser.

Flying down the northeastern shoreline of Crater Peninsula, the fourth section sighted a heavy cruiser of the *Mogami* class dead in the water perhaps anchored in the southwest part of Keravia Bay. Two torpedoes were dropped and seen to be running parallel and straight for the target when pilots lost sight of them. An observer in the Air Group Commander's plane at 12,000 feet saw a large explosion on the target. Another heavy cruiser of the *Nachi* or *Aoba* class in the entrance of Blanche Bay making about 25 knots and turning to the right was

attacked by fifth section which dropped three torpedoes. The gunner of one of the planes saw one torpedo hit the stern of the cruiser on the starboard side. The pilots of two escort fighters also observed the hit and reported that when they left the scene the cruiser was dead in the water her fantail under, and her bow out of the water at about a 15° angle.

Two TBF's of the sixth section attacked a *Mogami* class heavy cruiser about five miles northeast of Cape Tawui, dropping two torpedoes. The turret gunners of both planes saw two hits on the port side of the target, one abreast No. 2 turret, the other near the stern. The explosions were said to be very violent and the wake of the ship ceased.

Antiaircraft fire from the ships under the attack was most intense throughout the torpedo attacks. All guns, including the main batteries of the cruisers, were used against our planes. Because of low visibility, about half a mile generally, and because of the high speed of our planes, the fire was quite inaccurate.

The three fighter divisions assigned to cover Torpedo 9 dived into the bad weather and squalls with TBF's, but had difficulty in staying with them because of poor visibility. Coming out of their dives, those fighters that had become separated made strafing runs on any target they encountered. Short runs were made on a heavy cruiser by one division; two planes of another division strafed one CA and one CL or DD in three successive runs; part of a third division delivered a hard strafing attack athwartships of a CA south of Praed Point. Extent of damage inflicted in these strafing runs was undetermined.

It is estimated that from 40 to 50 Zekes and Haps were in the air during the course of the attack. They hovered over the formation until our fighters pushed over to follow the TBF's, then followed on the tail of the formation making stern runs, intensifying their attacks just as our planes pulled up from the dive. During retirement to the rendezvous, a point ten miles south of Cape St. George, large numbers of enemy fighters closed for attack. They made flat side attacks on small groups of planes and occasionally stern runs on single planes, but showed reluctance to approach when our planes were joined up in groups of six or more. Remaining astern, and out of range of our .30 caliber guns, they lobbed 20-mm. shells into the formation. By this means they scored a direct hit on the engine of one SBD and forced it to make a water landing in the Channel. Another unusual attack was that of Zekes using AA bombs. Flying from 500 to 2000 feet above a formation the Zekes dropped aerial bombs several times during retirement, but they scored no hits and the bombs were seen to explode harmlessly 500 feet or more below our planes.

Fourteen enemy planes were shot down by Fighter 9 during the retirement, or by fighters that became detached from the formation. One of our fighters was shot down by a Zeke that got on his tail as he was recovering from a dive. All planes, save the VF and VB shot down, returned safely to the *Essex*.

#### *BUNKER HILL GROUP*

Air Group 17 (Comdr. Michael P. Bagdanovich) from the *Bunker Hill*, began its attack about 0925. Bombing Squadron 17, made up of 23 Helldivers divided into five four-plane sections and one three-plane section, approached the target for the dive at an altitude of about 11,500 feet. Enemy fighters did not penetrate our fighter cover before the dive, but were seen to drop at least three antiaircraft bombs that exploded harmlessly

in large bursts with white streamers. Antiaircraft fire from the enemy cruisers was moderate to heavy but generally inaccurate and too low.

The pilots of the Helldivers selected enemy ships in the outer bays of Rabaul Harbor as targets and pushed over for steep dives averaging about 70 degrees. There was not as much rain and poor visibility as the *Essex* group had expressed. During part of the dive pilots strafed the target ships, the majority of which were zigzagging or circling at high speed. The bombers carried 1,600-pound AP, 1,000-pound SAP, and 500-pound GP bombs, which they released at altitudes between 1,500 and 1,000 feet and pulled out of their dives in some cases as low as 500 feet. Targets included one CA or CL, two CL's, several DD's, three oilers and at least one merchant vessel.

A three-stack light cruiser in Escape Bay was the target of planes of the first two sections of Helldivers, whose pilots reported scoring at least three hits with 1,000- or 1,600-pound bombs. This ship was seen exploding and burning violently and was believed to have sunk. One bomber of section three scored a direct hit with a 1,000-pound bomb on the fantail of a destroyer in eastern Great Harbor, due west of Sulphur Point. The bomb apparently set off the destroyer's depth charges, and the vessel was believed sunk. The leader of the fourth section attacked a heavy or possibly a light cruiser between Sulphur Point and Vulcan Crater, which had been seen under attack by planes of the *Essex* group earlier, and dropped a 1,600-pound bomb about 30 feet ahead of the ship. Another plane of the same section dropped two 500-pound bombs with unobserved results. The Air Group Commander observed a tremendous explosion and large yellow flames in this area, however, and believed the ship may have been sunk. Planes of section five scored two direct hits with 500-pound bombs on a light cruiser in Escape Bay, apparently blowing up her superstructure. A near hit and possible hit with two 500-pound bombs damaged a destroyer in Escape Bay. Several destroyers, three oilers or tankers, and at least one merchant vessel were strafed.

The bombers made a fast retirement at low altitude over Blanche Bay, joining whatever friendly planes they encountered. During the early stages of retirement six of the Helldivers were attacked by enemy fighters, though none was shot down. One bomber and its crew were reported missing. The squadron claimed to have destroyed one Val and damaged another.

The attack by the Avengers of Torpedo 17 was full of disappointments, largely because of mechanical failures of the Mark 13 Model 2-A torpedoes using the Mark 4 Model 3 exploder, which the planes were carrying. Only 17 of 20 Avengers that took off from the ship actually participated in the attack. One was forced to return with a faulty engine, another was apparently shot down on the way to the target, and the third did not take part in the attack.

As soon as they observed the bombers begin their dive, the Avengers started their approach up Blanche Bay. They turned back to take advantage of the shelter of a rain squall south of Escape Bay and then attacked. Eight Avengers attacked a heavy cruiser "similar to the *Furutaka* class" some four miles southeast of Praed Point. Approaching at various angles from 30° on the port bow to 60° on the starboard bow, the planes dropped their torpedoes at an average altitude of 275 feet, speed at the time of the drops being 180 knots, range 1,000

yards. One of the pilots was unable to release his torpedo, although he tried all releases and made two runs on the target. The torpedoes of three other planes were believed to have made erratic runs, and those of the remaining planes either missed or failed to explode. Several pilots reported seeing direct hits that did not result in explosions, and two torpedoes were seen to pass under the cruiser. During the attack the cruiser turned to starboard about 90° and attempted to steer against the course of the torpedoes. She also increased her speed from 20 to approximately 25 knots and sent up an intense but inaccurate antiaircraft fire. One plane became separated from the others and delivered a lone attack on the same target. The pilot had to make a second run to release his torpedo.

Four other Avengers attacked a ship in Greet Harbor which they identified as a light cruiser or a heavy cruiser, which employed the same evasive tactics as did the heavy cruiser described above. The pilot who led the attack was unable to drop his torpedo although he tried all releases repeatedly. Another pilot, after the same experience with his releases while attacking the cruiser proceeded to attack two cargo ships along the coast northwest of Rapopo Field, only to have his releases fail again. His plane was severely damaged by antiaircraft fire and enemy aircraft. Two destroyers were attacked by three Avengers with unknown results.

Not one torpedo of the entire squadron was seen to explode during the attack. The only damage Torpedo 17 could therefore claim to have inflicted upon the enemy was that accomplished by strafing. The attack was delivered in the face of intense, though generally inaccurate, antiaircraft fire and considerable fighter opposition. No runs were made on the torpedo planes until the retirement phase. One Avenger, which became separated from the division in making a second run while attempting to release its torpedo, was attacked by about six Zekes over a distance of 30 miles. Gunner and radioman successfully fought off the attack, though the plane took 207 bullet holes from 7.7-mm. and 20-mm. guns. In all, the Avengers claimed to have destroyed two Zekes, probably destroyed another, and damaged one. The squadron's losses were one plane forced down at sea by antiaircraft fire, one missing, and the Avenger that sustained 207 bullet holes, which though it landed aboard was counted a total loss. Two pilots and four crewmen were missing and one pilot wounded.

Fighting Squadron 18, which escorted the bombers and torpedo planes of Air Group 17, had only been formed about two months and had enjoyed little opportunity to train in gunnery, night flying, and carrier landings. In spite of these handicaps the squadron was commended by the captain of the *Bunker Hill* for doing a "magnificent job" on the Rabaul mission and in the air attack on the task force that followed.

Three of the 30 Hellcats intended for the escort of VT and VB planes to Rabaul proved to be duds, and only 27 fighters took off. They were divided into six four-plane divisions and one three-plane division, each of which prior to take-off was assigned a specified group of Avengers or Helldivers and made responsible for escort and coverage of that group. Fighter pilots resisted many opportunities to engage a Japanese decoy that attempted to draw them out of escort position, and followed the bombers down and through their attacks. Enemy fighters, the majority of which were Zekes, generally withheld fire and remained out of range until the bombers began their attack.

One four-plane section of F6F's was jumped by a flight of approximately 12 Zekes that came suddenly out of a cloud. While the F6F's were recovering from strafing runs on a destroyer the Zekes began a coordinated, or at least simultaneous, attack from both sides, overhead, and astern. The Hellcats started weaving to defend

themselves, but one was shot down and the others became separated. The division leader, after shooting down one plane, found himself alone and under attack by six to eight Zekes that were making side and overhead runs on his plane. By taking violent evasive action, the pilot was able to reach tree-top level and head for the open sea, though three Zekes kept a close pursuit for several miles. The Hellcat was badly shot up, but managed to return aboard its carrier. The two remaining planes of the division were pursued for fifty miles by eight to ten Zekes. One of the F6F's had its hydraulic system shot and had to land in the water near *Bunker Hill*. The pilot was recovered by the destroyer.

Comdr. Bagdanovich, Air Group Commander, flying a TBF-1C escorted by two F6F's, was repeatedly subjected to attack by superior forces of Zekes. The first attack, made by six to eight Zekes coming from overhead and astern, was countered by a weaving reverse by the two Hellcats, while the Avenger ducked into a cloud. After warding off the attack the two escort fighters followed into the cloud, but were unable to find the Air Group Commander. They became embroiled in fights with Zekes after emerging from the cloud and shot down two of them. Separated from his wingmen, Comdr. Bagdanovich operated independently until his retirement. Ducking in and out of clouds, he and his gunner fought off four additional attacks of four Zekes each and one consisting of two Zeros. On his way back to *Bunker Hill*, after undergoing attack by some 28 enemy fighters, he was attacked about a half mile southeast of Cape St. George by a P-38 whose aim, fortunately, was bad.

The remaining divisions of Fighter 18, while meeting with considerable opposition, did not encounter coordinated attacks by large numbers of enemy fighters. In all, the squadron destroyed 11 Zekes and reported 4 more probably destroyed. One Zeke flew into a belly tank jettisoned by a Hellcat over Rabaul, burst into flames, and crashed. The fighters strafed a destroyer, a transport, and a tanker. They lost one Hellcat over the target area, one that made a water landing because of battle damage, and one that crashed into the barrier aboard the carrier as a result of damage sustained in combat. Only one of the pilots was lost.

## INDEPENDENCE GROUP

Air Group 22 (Comdr. James M. Peters), consisting of nine TBF's and sixteen F6F's from the *Independence*, was the smallest group participating in the strike and the last to attack. The fighter escort was divided into four divisions of four planes each. Two divisions flew ahead of 1,000 to 1,500 feet above the TBF's one on each side, and the other two divisions, likewise disposed ahead and on each side, flew at 3,000 feet above the Avengers, which came in at an altitude of 11,000 feet.

The Group chose as its targets a heavy cruiser and a destroyer steaming south about eight to ten miles northwest of the Duke of York Islands. The cruiser, which did not conform to any class known to the pilots,<sup>6</sup> was seen by two officers to have been subjected to attack by TBF's of another group,<sup>7</sup> which were seen to launch their torpedoes without, apparently, making any hits.

<sup>6</sup> It was described as having one thick, slightly raked stack; two or possibly three turrets forward; and one turret abaft the mainmast ("a stick on a tripod"), which was a considerable distance aft the stack. A catapult was between the mainmast and the stack.

<sup>7</sup> This was possibly Torpedo Squadron 9 from the *Essex*.

The CA was maneuvering and turning to the port when the planes of Torpedo 22 made their attack. At an altitude of 275 to 300 feet, speed 190 to 200 knots, range 1,000 to 1,600 yards, the Avengers dropped their "fish." The bomb bay of one plane would not open because of damage in catapulting, and only eight torpedoes were launched. One was seen to run at right angles to the direction of launching, and one and possibly two were believed to have failed to run. Pilots saw only one hit which was at or near the fantail of the cruiser. This seemed to do no damage, since the ship continued at the same speed, and no fire, smoke, or list were seen to result from the hit. The planes encountered a "virtual blanket" of antiaircraft fire from the cruiser and destroyer.

All the escorting F6F's, except a top cover of four planes, dived on the cruiser and destroyer in strafing attacks, two divisions attacking the cruiser and one division both the cruiser and destroyer. Results of the attack on the cruiser were unknown, but the destroyer slowed down perceptibly after the strafing.

Ten of the escorting Hellcats joined up with nine TBF's of another air group after the attack, mistaking them for Torpedo 22. Only one of the sixteen escorting F6F's, that of Lieut. E. W. Marsh, joined up with the nine Avengers from the *Independence*. On the way back to the carrier two Zekes approached as if to attack and Marsh, the sole fighter escort, turned and attacked the Zekes, shooting down one of them. Two more Zekes with an advantage in altitude joined in the attack and hit the Hellcat in a vital place. The plane rolled over, and after Marsh bailed out at about 800 feet, crashed in the water. The pilot's parachute opened about 100 feet above the water. Three Zekes in succession strafed the water where Marsh entered, though with what results is unknown. Marsh was known as an expert swimmer, and if not injured by the strafing may have reached land on New Britain or New Ireland. His action was believed to have saved the torpedo squadron from losses in planes and men.

The top cover of four Hellcats became separated from the Avengers during the torpedo attack. A few minutes later the fighter pilots saw what they took for an attack on the Avengers in progress over the channel just east of Gazelle Point, and immediately headed for the fight. Upon arriving in the vicinity they were attacked by 12 to 18 Zekes. What they had mistaken for an attack upon the torpedo squadron was in reality a simulated battle between Japanese fighters—in other words a trap. In the ensuing fight, the division leader shot down two Zekes and the three other planes of the division accounted for two more. One Hellcat was lost during the fight, and another as the result of a water landing necessitated by combat damage. The pilot of the latter plane was rescued.

## LOSSES AND DAMAGE OF TASK FORCE MONTGOMERY

By 1030 the three air groups of Task Force Montgomery had returned to the carriers and by 1147 had completed landing aboard. Correlation of the reports by ships and pilots and evaluation of photographic reconnaissance resulted in estimates of damage inflicted that were somewhat lower than the estimates of individual ships and air groups. The following figures are compiled by the Task Force Commander as a "conservative estimate."

## Damage to Enemy Ships

Sunk:

- 2 DD's
- 1 DD, class unknown, west of Mt. Turanguna
- 1 DD, class unknown, Matupi Harbor

Possibly Sunk:

- 1 CA and 1 CL.
- 1 CA, believed to be *Nachi* or *Aoba* class, in Blanche Bay.
- 1 CL, class unknown, south of Praed Point.

Damaged:

- 3 CA's and 2 CL's.
- 1 CA, believed to be of the *Mogami* class in Karavia Bay.
- 1 CA, class unknown, off Tawui Point.
- 1 CA, new class, Duke of York Islands.
- 1 CL, class unknown, in Escape Bay.
- 1 CL, believed of the *Tenryu* or *Natori* class, off Tawui Point.

## Enemy Aircraft Destroyed (Zekes)

By planes from:

<i>Essex</i>	16
<i>Bunker Hill</i>	14
<i>Independence</i>	5
Total	35

## Aircraft Losses of Task Force

Ship	VF	VB	VT	Total
<i>Essex</i>	1	1	0	2
<i>Bunker Hill</i>	3	2	3	8
<i>Independence</i>	3	-	0	3
Total	7	3	3	13

One Helldiver from the *Bunker Hill* was listed as an operational loss.

## AIR ATTACK ON TASK FORCE MONTGOMERY

The coordinated air strikes on Rabaul of the morning of 11 November was, according to the directive of ComSoPAac to be followed by strikes on the same target in the afternoon. Task Force Sherman was cruising east of Buka Island when its air groups returned from the morning strike, while Task Group Montgomery received its returning planes aboard west of Empress Augusta Bay.

Both task forces were furnished land-based combat air patrol by ComAirSols, following the practice established during the first strike on Rabaul on 5 November. As in the previous strike, Task Force Sherman was thus enabled to send on the strike all fighters from the carriers. The carrier-trained planes of the air cover which proved "very satisfactory" according to Admiral Sherman, were landed and serviced aboard throughout the day to prevent their having to return to their base for fuel.

Zero wind conditions at the launching points made it necessary for the task force to maintain continuous full speed operation throughout the morning in order to launch and take aboard the CAP. The high speed approach from Espiritu Santo and the full speed flight operations of the morning had so reduced the fuel supply of the destroyers that, if continued throughout the afternoon, they would have completely run out of fuel by dark. Since the destroyers could not be refueled during flight operations, the task force commander decided that it was impossible to deliver the second strike. The task force then retired at reduced speed, refueling the destroyers the next morning to enable them to reach Espiritu Santo.

It was planned to have three separate groups in the Combat Air Patrol of Task Group Montgomery. These groups were: (1) the defensive fighters attached to the task force, (2) the "Gem" fighters consisting of 24 planes of VF 17 based at Munda and 12 fighters of VF 33 based at Segi Point, (3) 12 "Beef-up" fighters available at certain times and 24 additional fighters on emergency call at Guadalcanal. Besides the assigned shore-based cover, the task force also had a carrier-based cover of 24 planes, 8 from each of the three carriers.

The shore-based patrols did not prove entirely satisfactory. The CAP scheduled to arrive over the force at dawn failed to make contact and had to be vectored to the task force from distances up to 54 miles. The 12 "Beef-up" fighters scheduled to arrive on station over the ships at 1115 failed to materialize, and two hours and a half later when the 24 VF on "alert" at Guadalcanal were requested, they also failed to arrive. Thus the main strength of the shore-based CAP was not available to the task force. The only shore-based planes to participate actively in the defense of the ships were 33 fighters from Munda and Segi Point.

There were numerous indications that an air attack might be expected in the afternoon. During the morning several high-altitude enemy aircraft believed to have been shadowing the task force were picked up by radar. Planes of the CAP were continuously being vectored out to shoot down snoopers. Consequently, all preparations for repelling an air attack were made before contact was established. All radar sets were in operation on continuous search.

In the meantime, after planes from the first Rabaul strike had completed landing aboard at 1147, preparations for a second strike in the afternoon went forward quickly. By 1330 re-servicing and rearming was completed

and the carriers began to launch the fighter escort for the second Rabaul strike.

At 1315, when the ships were only about 160 miles southeast of the Japanese base, the SK radar of the *Bunker Hill* picked up a large group of unidentified aircraft at a distance of 119 miles, bearing 320°. This contact was immediately reported to the *Essex* which was controlling fighter director ship. When the raid came within range of the SM radar at about 78 miles the altitude of the raiding planes was established as 10,000 feet, bearing 340°.

The 33 "Gem" fighters from Munda and Segi Point had been scheduled to return to their shore bases at 1315, but were ordered to remain over the ship by the Force Fighter Director until the ship-based patrol, 16 of which the carriers began to launch at 1315, could arrive on station. Probably because of fuel shortage, however, 11 of the shore-based planes departed for their base. This apparently left only 22 fighters available for intercepting the approaching raiders, since the carrier patrol planes had not yet made rendezvous, and the fighter escort of the second Rabaul striking groups was just being launched.

The 22 VF, which were promptly vectored toward the incoming raiders, made a tally-ho 45 miles from the task force. The only amplifying information received as to number, altitude, and type of the bandits, however, was "Jesus Christ! There are millions of them! Let's go to work!" Although the shore-based planes made a good interception and made excellent use of their opportunity, the force fighter director complained that he did not have adequate control of the fighters, primarily because of poor VHF communication and lack of close team work between fighters and fighter director.

Radar plot indicated that at approximately 70 miles distance the bandits split into three distinct groups, one heading to the right to circle and attack the task force from the southwest, one to the left to attack from the southeast, and a third consisting of a large number of dive bombers that bore straight in to launch the initial attack. The attack force was estimated to consist of 53 to 60 Vals, 15 to 20 Tonys, Haps and Zekes, 45 to 50 Kates, and 5 to 8 Bettys—a total of well more than 100 planes. Of these our shore-based fighters probably accounted for 5 VF's, 5 Vals, 4 Kates, and 1 Betty, before the attack on the task force began.

By the time of the initial attack at 1355 all the escort fighters and some of the torpedo planes were airborne. The VT immediately took cover in distant clouds, where they remained throughout the attack. The force fighter director in the *Essex* attempted to control all planes taking off from the carriers, but confusion of VHF channels caused all fighter direction to collapse when the raid was 35 miles from the task force. With more than 100 of our fighters in the air, only some 20 intercepted the enemy planes beyond that limit. Our remaining fighters engaged the enemy near the task force by sighting targets themselves or by means of a limited amount of indirect control.

All battle stations aboard the ships were alerted and full Condition Able was set. The ships were in a circular antiaircraft formation, carriers in the center and destroyers on the circumference. At about 1400 the disposition reversed course to approximately 125° T., and the ships thereafter resorted individually to quick jogs to one side or the other, with no further reversal or change of the disposition. This was the first time carriers of the new *Essex* class were brought under attack by enemy aircraft.

The first group of planes actually sighted consisted of 33 dive bombers, Vals, which were not under attack by our fighters as they came in. From 22,000 feet the Vals glided to diving position, at which the formation split up into sections and peeled off at close intervals of about four or five seconds, with an interval of ten seconds between sections. As the first section began its dive two of our fighters were seen to attack the last section. The Vals dived on the three carriers at about 45° angle down to approximately 1,500 feet.

The attacking planes were taken under fire by all guns that would bear—5-inch, 40-mm., and 20-mm. Even a few of the rear gunners of Helldivers, parked on the flight deck of the *Bunker Hill*, opened up on the enemy with their .30 caliber guns. The Vals attempted evasive action on their dives, and at least seven of them that commenced dives on the *Bunker Hill* turned away under fire before completing their attacks. The sky was so thoroughly blanketed with bursts, tracers, and smoke that any attempt to spot gunfire would have been futile. Even so, the antiaircraft fire proved quite effective. Of the eight dive bombers attacking the *Essex*, five were believed shot down and the remaining three damaged by the guns of that ship. The *Bunker Hill*'s gunners believed they accounted for four Vals, though all such claims were admittedly faulty because of the number of ships firing.

So effectively had the CIC evaluator of the gunnery department furnished information, that no enemy planes came within sight without being instantly taken observation by gunners who had been warned where to look, even though planes were at times coming in from several directions simultaneously. IFF enabled radar officers to single out enemy ships at ranges as close as ten miles and distinguished our own fighters that were mingled with the bandits. Nevertheless, it was inevitable that, with more than 200 enemy and friendly planes in the air, several of our own fighters were mistakenly fired upon. This was especially true when the fighters pressed their pursuit of enemy planes within range. At some stages of the attack our fighters were darting in and out of the disposition at low and medium altitude. One ship found itself firing upon a diving Val, which was hotly pursued by a Corsair that in turn had a Zero on his tail.

A second raid, a dive bombing attack of some 18 Vals, developed next. The formation of enemy planes had been broken up by our fighters, however, and the attack was delivered mainly by individual planes. The dives were shallow and not well coordinated. The dive bombing attacks were without important results, scoring only near hits—one near the *Essex*, five near the *Bunker Hill*, and four near the *Independence*. The Vals did some strafing but caused only minor casualties to personnel.

At about 1404, while the second dive bombing attack was in progress, the first torpedo attack developed. Some 21 Kates and a few Bettys reached the formation, but failed to press home their attack. They were beaten off by our fighters or shot down by anti-aircraft fire of the ships. Three torpedo planes began a run on the *Independence*, but one was shot down by her 40-mm. guns, one dropped its torpedo on a parallel but opposite course, and a third was beaten off. The only torpedo plane that came within range of the *Essex* was fired upon by her 5-inch guns and shot down by fighters.

Between 1408 and 1420 a second torpedo attack was delivered by some 15 planes, a majority of which were Kates. They came in low on the water from astern of the formation in widely separated groups of three under

heavy attack by fighters. One plane was destroyed by running into a 5-inch shell splash, the *Independence* accounted for another with her batteries, and between the antiaircraft fire and our fighter planes, the attack was broken up. A final raid was reported at 1442 to be coming in the port bow, but it was intercepted by fighters and driven off before coming in sight or gun range of the formation.

The enemy attack appeared to be a poorly coordinated affair, although this may have been because of effective interception that broke up attack groups. At any rate, groups of single planes straggled in one at a time, permitting maximum concentration of fighters and antiaircraft fire on each one as it came in. But for three Vals which attacked the *Essex* in steep dives, and dive bombing was considered only fair in quality. The torpedo planes dropped their projectiles with little accuracy and at considerable range. They managed to penetrate the destroyer screen with only three torpedoes, one of which passed close astern of the *Bunker Hill*, but all of which were successfully avoided.

Fighter cover for the enemy attack force was negligible, and our own fighters enjoyed an unprecedented field day. As mentioned above, the carriers were in the midst of launching planes for the second strike on Rabaul when the attack began. The *Essex* had launched all her VT and 31 of her VF, the *Bunker Hill* had 21 VF and 5 VT in the air, and the *Independence* had 12 VF and 2 VT launched when the attack began and launched 6 more VF after the first dive bombing attack was concluded. The last Hellcat had just cleared the deck of the *Bunker Hill* when a Val pulled out of its dive directly ahead. The Hellcat pilot shot the Val down before it could begin its climb. Likewise, a TBF, just after being catapulted from the *Independence*, caught another Val in its exposed belly with raking fire from the top gun turret and sent it crashing into the sea aflame.

The only indication the planes that had made rendezvous were given of the approaching attack was the antiaircraft fire from the ships of the task force. Since the altitude of rendezvous was 3,000 feet, and many planes had not joined up when the attack began, nearly all the fighting that followed took place between the rendezvous level and the surface. The Vals that had penetrated our CAP cover had already dropped their bombs before our fighters were able to strike them. Intensive attacks were made on retiring Vals of the first and second dive bombing groups, however. Altogether, it was estimated that its carrier-based planes alone shot down more than 30 dive bombers.

The Kate and Betty torpedo planes, coming in singly or in small groups without fighter cover, were easy targets for our fighters. More than 20 Kates were shot down, most of them quite low over the water. While the most effective fighter tactics proved the short stern run, pilots displayed considerable ingenuity and courage in improvising other tactics. Without fighter direction to assist them, many pilots headed into the thick of the antiaircraft fire, using that means of locating enemy planes. When the guns of one VF jammed during combat, the pilot flew low over a Kate, dropped his belly tank on enemy from 12 feet, and saw his target burst into flames and crash. Another pilot with jammed guns frightened a Japanese torpedo plane off his torpedo course by making a dummy run and turned him into the range of another fighter which shot him down.

The last enemy planes were driven away from the task force by 1445, after the ships had been under attack for about 50 minutes. Compilation of reports of individual ships indicated a total of 105 enemy planes shot down by fighters and antiaircraft fire. Eliminating probable overlapping, the task force commander reduced the

estimate to a total of 76 planes: 40 Vals, 30 Kates, 3 Bettys, 2 Tonys, and 1 Zeke. This does not include enemy aircraft destroyed by shore-based fighters.

Damage suffered by the task group was slight by comparison. The after radio antenna masts of the *Bunker Hill* were hit by 40-mm. projectiles from one of her own guns, and one small bullet hole was found in the stack as a result strafing. Three near hits caused no damage. One bomb detonated upon striking the water 75 feet off the port quarter of the *Essex* penetrating her hull with some 12 fragments, all of which entered above the water line. One officer and six enlisted men were slightly wounded as a result. One bomb exploded in mid-air about 30 feet from the island structure of the *Independence*; a near hit struck the water about 75 feet from the stern and sprayed the after gun buckets with shrapnel; two duds fell near the ship, and one bomb exploded at a distance of 50 yards without damage to the ship. There were only three combat losses in carrier planes: one VF and one VB from the *Bunker Hill*, and one VT from the *Essex*. Two VT's, one from the *Essex* and one from the *Independence*, were reported as operational losses. All personnel except one pilot and two crewmen were rescued.

The new carriers of the *Essex* class experienced their first heavy air attack in this engagement. Captains expressed the highest satisfaction in the performance of ships and personnel. The captain of the *Bunker Hill* in commanding his personnel remarked that approximately 60 percent of them had never served at sea before being assigned to that ship.

While the enemy air group suffered heavy losses and proved poorly coordinated in action, its attack was well timed. Although only negligible damage was inflicted upon our ships, the enemy did succeed in penetrating the CAP and delivering a heavy attack. The escape of our carriers, their flight decks spotted with numerous bomb-loaded planes, was not without an element of luck. As Captain Ofstie of the *Essex* remarked, "There is rather a close margin, in these affairs, between victory and disaster." It must be at least credited to enemy strategy that this air attack forestalled a second strike on Rabaul.

Upon the completion of the enemy attack, the carriers took aboard, refueled, and launched the shore-based fighters, some of which, however, were retained aboard overnight. Planes which had been launched for the second Rabaul strike were then landed on board. At 1720 the task group began retirement at a speed of 25 knots, which had to be reduced to 20 knots after dark for lack of fuel. Between 2030 and 2115 four groups of bogeys and one single were reported on various bearings, though none approached the task group nearer to 25 miles. It was a bright moonlight night and the ships' wakes must have been visible for several miles. It was believed that only want of torpedo planes, because of losses of the afternoon, prevented the enemy from pressing home his advantage.

The destroyers were refueled from the *Bunker Hill* and *Independence* beginning at sunrise. Upon completion of fueling, the task group, minus the *McKee* and *Murray*, which had been detached for other duty earlier, proceeded without further incident to Espiritu Santo, arriving at 1700 13 November.

## AIR ATTACK ON TASK FORCE MERRILL 12-13 NOVEMBER

Supply echelons continued to move northwestward to Cape Torokina under air cover by day and surface cover by night. On the night of 12-13 November the Fourth Echelon was on its way toward Empress Augusta Bay. Surface cover was provided by a task force under command of Rear Admiral Aaron S. Merrill, consisting of the *Montpelier* (F), *Columbia*, and *Denver* screened by DesRon 23, Capt. Arleigh A. Burke, with the *Charles Ausburne*, *Stanly*, *Eaton*, *Claxton*, and *Converse*. There was a full moon that night, with a few scattered clouds close to land, and unlimited visibility. The sea was glassy calm.

Anticipating the usual night air attacks, Admiral Merrill ordered his covering force to assume a special antiaircraft formation at sunset, which was at 1835. Shortly after dark Japanese float type snoopers began shadowing both the supply ships and the covering task force. They were careful to remain just beyond 8,000 yards, which they apparently know to be the range at which our ships were accustomed to open fire. This snooping continued throughout the night with Bettys replacing the float type planes after midnight. After moonrise a PV-1 night fighter reported on station and was unfortunately fired upon by the *Stanly*. No damage was done except that probably inflicted upon the morale of the PV's crew. The fighter director, in the *Columbia*, vectored the plane out toward several snoopers, but no contact was made. Night fighters were relieved on station throughout the night. Snoopers continued to circle the formation without making any attempt to attack. They carefully remained out of gun range, yet inside the ten-mile circle which our force doctrine had set as the inner limit for night fighter operation.

Finally, exasperated by the persistence of the snoopers, the task force commander gave permission to the fighter director to use the night fighter inside the usual ten-mile limit. About 0400 a new night fighter reported on station and was vectored on to a Betty that was doing the snooping at the moment. No "tally-ho" was received, but lookouts saw tracer fire high in the air, then a small ball of flame falling comet-like into the sea. After some anxious moments our night fighter reported "one less Betty," and asked for another target.

Loss of their snooper apparently determined the waiting enemy groups to take action, for at 0430 they closed the task force. They were taken under fire when they came within 6,000 yards and withdrew without attacking. They came in and retired very low on the water and were only picked up by radar about the same time they were sighted.

A few minutes later another group of bogies was detected bearing 075°, distance 17 miles, and several single bogies were on the screen to the southeast and southwest, one suddenly appearing at 205°, distance three miles. The course of the formation was changed to 090° at 0449, and several emergency turns were executed during the following minutes of action. A group enemy planes could be seen coming in low, bearing 245°, and at 0452 the *Denver* and the *Stanly*, followed quickly by the other ships, began firing on the starboard bow.

Only three planes, all of the Bettys, could be sighted by eye, and all three were seen to launch torpedoes from an altitude of approximately fifty feet. One of them disintegrated under a direct hit after the first or second 5-inch salvo. The other two turned to an eastern course and were taken under concentrated automatic

antiaircraft fire from the *Denver* and *Stanly*. The *Stanly* reported torpedo wakes going down her starboard side on course 310°, and an emergency turn to this course was ordered by the task force commander. After the *Denver* steadied on about course 300°, she saw wakes parallel and on either quarter.

At about this time a fourth plane was sighted by the *Denver* coming in from abeam very low and very close. The plane dropped a torpedo at a range of not more than 700 yards and swung toward the ship's bow to get out. The forward 20-mm. battery cut the plane in two, and it crashed just off the port bow.

The *Denver* now found herself boxed in by three torpedoes, with the ship swinging to the port and no opportunity to take avoiding action. At 0455 the last torpedo launched hit the starboard side of the ship at approximately frame 101, at the after engine room, about the level of the bilge keel. There was no flash, but a huge sheet of water mounted up and completely inundated the after section of the ship. The shock of the explosion was so severe that personnel on the bridge, including the commanding officer, were knocked down and thrown about. The commanding officer Capt. Robert P. Briscoe, regained his feet in time to see a torpedo pass down the starboard side parallel to the ship at a distance of 75 yards. The navigating officer, who had the conn and was at the port wing of the bridge, saw at least one and possibly two torpedoes pass down the port side.

All power and control went off temporarily. The ship listed rapidly seven degrees to the starboard, then increased the list slowly to eleven and a half degrees. Listing was stopped by pumping the starboard tanks and gradually reduced until it was within one degree of normal. Only the No. 4 shaft was still in commission and steering was available, although all communication was gone except by the general announcing system. Forward power from both steam and diesel generators was available, but all power for the ship's battery aft of the forward engine room was gone.

Investigation revealed that the explosion had opened the after engine room and adjacent tanks to the sea. The third deck, outboard in the vicinity of explosion, was blown to nearly the level of the second deck. The shell plating, including the two after sections of armor plate which were missing, was open from frame 93 to frame 105, the hole extending from the waterline to about the level of the bilge keel. Flexing of the ship caused a wrinkle with a maximum deflection of two inches in the forward decks and shell plating at frame 18. Altogether eight compartments were opened to the sea and sixteen, including the after fireroom, the crew's mess and berthing space, and mount No. 5 handling and magazine room, were flooded.

Twenty enlisted men were reported missing as result of the explosion, two seriously wounded, six moderately, and six slightly wounded.

Since an early air attack was expected, every effort was made to obtain a full battery service. By sunrise the electrical officer reported that all automatic weapons and all usable mounts and turrets aft had emergency casualty power. As soon as power was regained on TBS, the task force commander was informed of the *Denver*'s conditions, and the *Stanly* and *Eaton* were ordered to stand by, and fighter cover and a tug were ordered. The convoy, then 30 miles to the eastward, dispatched the *Sioux* to go to the aid of the damaged ship.

At 0602 the first fighter contingent arrived and was placed under control of the fighter director unit aboard the *Eaton*. The air cover was later built up to 24 planes. Towing gear was rigged in preparation for the *Sioux*, which arrived at 0808 and promptly took the cruiser under tow. A towing speed of seven knots was achieved and, after arduous damage control measures, was increased to eight point three knots. At 1600, however, the steering control panel was shorted out and all steering power was lost. With her rudder jammed at eight degrees left, the *Denver* had a tendency to ride out on the tug's port quarter and make towing more difficult.

Air attack was expected momentarily throughout the day, and every precaution was taken to insure that the ship could be fought at her maximum effectiveness. All antiaircraft batteries were kept at the alert until well after the passing of the Treasury Islands at 1730. The day was brilliant cloudless, and to the commanding officer it seemed "endless." "It will remain one of the mysteries of this war," he observed, "why, with the full knowledge that four transports and two AK's were unloading at Empress Augusta Bay and that task force was covering to the southeast, no Japanese planes were even detected in the distance." The only explanation seemed to be the punishment dealt Rabaul by our carrier forces two days before.

The *Denver* slipped under the welcome cover of a rain by skirting the coast of Simbo and Rendova Islands at dark. The rain furnished refuge until 2200. The damaged ship reached Purvis Bay at 0900, 14 November, without further incident.

While Task Force Merrill had been fighting off air attacks, the convoy that formed the Fourth Echelon to Cape Torokina was being harassed by snoopers. Four times during the night screening destroyers opened fire upon single enemy planes that approached within range. Each time the plane withdrew immediately. A single plane made an unobserved approach on the convoy at 0420 and dropped a stick of bombs about 150 yards on the starboard quarter of *Anthony*. An hour later, shortly before the torpedo attack was delivered against the covering force, three enemy torpedo planes approached the convoy and were seen to drop two torpedoes. The formation and transports executed an emergency nine turn and avoided the projectiles. One of the three torpedo planes was believed to have been shot down by the *Wadsworth* and *Anthony*. The convoy continued to Cape Torokina and unloaded without being further molested.



## NIGHT ACTION OF DESTROYER SQUADRON 23

### 16–17 NOVEMBER

Destroyer Squadron 23, hardly one of the less active units of the Third Fleet, surpassed its own record for variety and pace of action on the night of 16–17 November. Within a few eventful hours this squadron encountered and sank one enemy submarine, bombarded an enemy airfield, and fought off three Japanese air attacks, in the course of which it destroyed at least five planes.

These operations were initiated as cover for two supply echelons—the Fifth Echelon to Empress Augusta Bay, which was to arrive at about 0800 on the 17th, and the Fifth Echelon to the Treasury Islands, which was to arrive about dawn on the same day. Both echelons were to follow the regular scheduled routes south of New Georgia and west of Vella Lavella.

Destroyer Squadron 23 (Capt. Arleigh A. Burke), less the *Spence*, *Foote*, and *Thatcher*, was organized as follows:

DesDiv 45, Capt. Arleigh A. Burke (ComDesRon 23)

*Charles F. Ausburne*, Comdr. Luther K. Reynolds

*Claxton*, Comdr. Herald F. Stout

*Dyson*, Comdr. Roy A. Gano

DesDiv 46, Comdr. Bernard L. Austin

*Converse*, Comdr. Henry J. Armstrong, Jr.<sup>8</sup>

*Stanly*, Comdr. Robert W. Cavenagh

According to the operation plan of the Commander Third Fleet, Destroyer Squadron 23 was to have as its first task the destruction of any enemy surface craft, submarines, or aircraft that attempted to interfere with the approach, landing, and withdrawal of the supply echelons. Secondly, if no such threat developed, the squadron was to destroy enemy shipping approaching or leaving Buka or Matchin Bay. If not engaged in either of these tasks, the squadron was to bombard Buka airfield from the west. If the latter task were undertaken, the bombardment was to last 30 minutes and to be completed by 0500 of the 17th, after which the squadron was to withdraw to the southeast and assist the echelons on call, covering their return to the south.

Shore-based aircraft of ComAirSoPac, Maj. Gen. Mitchell, were to furnish air cover for Destroyer Squadron 23 during daylight, provide night fighters as protection against snoopers from moonrise to sunrise, Black Cats for spotting in the bombardment, and B-24's for night search attack against enemy surface forces. Bombers of this command were also scheduled to strike the Buka-Bonis airfields as soon after the destroyers started their bombardment as practicable. Thirty-three planes were to mine the Buka area between 0245 and 0330, though the position of the mines would not interfere with the proposed bombardment.

Intelligence received by the squadron commander just before sailing on this mission indicated that Bougainville

<sup>8</sup> Editors' note: There is a penciled-in question mark next to Armstrong's name indicating that the reviewer was unsure who commanded *Converse*. In fact, *Converse*'s commanding officer was Cdr. DeWitt Clinton E. Hamberger.

and south Buka area contained considerably greater defensive strength than hitherto reported, and that there had been an increase in coastal defensive weapons, the most likely positions of which were given. While the exact strength of Japanese surface forces in the Rabaul-Buka area was not known, it was clear that such forces as were available were considerably larger than the five destroyers of Squadron 23. The enemy had not shown any desire for battle since the engagement of Empress Augusta Bay, 2 November, however, and it was believed that bold and aggressive action on the part of our destroyers, combined with superior equipment and more accurate gunnery would compensate for any numerical superiority the enemy might care to exert.

In planning the operation Capt. Burke laid out a track that would take the squadron well clear of the coast of Bougainville, far enough to see during the hours of darkness to avoid snoopers if possible. If time permitted, he hoped to gain a position west and north of Buka from which the squadron might search the Rabaul-Buka route on its way back for the bombardment of the airfield. Searching this area before the bombardment would also

obviate the necessity for posting a picket ship during the bombardment, and there was the chance that snoopers might mistake our force on that route for their own ships. All ships were to maintain continuous radar guard, and the *Claxton* was assigned as fighter director ship, with the *Dyson* as standby fighter director ship.

There was no time for issuing specific written orders, but on the day of sailing a conference of commanding officers, navigators and gunnery officers was held in the order to familiarize all hands with the situation and the general plan.

## ANTISUBMARINE ACTION

At 1900, on 15 November, Destroyer Squadron 23 got underway from Port Purvis, Florida Islands, proceeded by a route south of Savo, Russel, and Rendova Islands, and arrived northwest of Simbo Island at dawn of the 16th. The squadron was then in a position to cover the supply echelons from the northwest. The day of the 16th passed uneventfully. In the early evening the sky was clear overhead with few clouds on the horizon to the north. The sea was smooth with gentle rollers from the east, the wind was force 1 from the east. The moon was just past full and visibility was extremely good after moonrise, ships being visible with the naked eye at 8,000 to 9,000 yards.

At sunset the squadron came to course 335° T., which was the course to Empress Augusta Bay. At 1940, after twilight had faded, the ships came left by division column movement to course 290°, with divisions 5,000 yards apart and destroyer leaders on a north-south line of bearing in position latitude 77° 02' 50" S., longitude 154° 59' 45" E. For three hours after sunset not a single bogey disturbed the squadron, and it was hoped that the Japanese search planes might be eluded entirely.

At 2143 the *Converse*, flagship of Division 46, broke TBS silence to report a surface contact bearing 208° T., distance 9,700 yards. The *Stanly* confirmed this contact, and the Squadron Commander immediately ordered a division column movement to course 208° T. The speed of the contact was reported variously at zero to three knots. The range at which the target was detected and the faintness of the "pip" on the radar screen

indicated that the contact was a surfaced submarine. Since Division 46 was closer to the target than Division 5, Capt. Burke ordered Comdr. Austin to maneuver his division to within 4,000 yards-the range at which it was estimated a submarine could sight a destroyer-open fire, and stand by to ram. The idea of firing torpedoes was reluctantly discarded because the submarine was headed almost directly toward the approaching destroyers and the torpedo salvo density would have had to be great to register a hit. It was also feared that if the squadron were maneuvered to a more favorable torpedo firing position the submarine's listening device would warn it of the danger and it would submerge and escape. Besides, as Capt. Burke explained, it was "the squadron's doctrine to attack anything at once."

Division 46 was ordered to make the attack while Division 45 stood by in case its help was needed. The commander of the division was also ordered to illuminate the target after he had opened fire, but to leave the searchlights on only long enough to establish identification.

The *Converse* and *Stanly* maneuvered to firing position at a range of 4,000 yards, came to course 240° T. at 2156, opened fire, and turned on their searchlights. Even before illumination, dull flashes of hits were seen on the target. The first two salvos of the *Converse* were reported to hit by an officer at the Sugar George radar, and her control officer saw hits on the bow of the target during the period of illumination. The *Stanly* also reported seeing hits on the target. Both ships saw a column of black smoke rising from the vicinity of the target's bow. One small explosion on the target was seen from the *Ausburne*, 7,000 yards away. During the illumination the craft was identified as a large enemy submarine, later classified as I-52. The *Converse* and *Stanly* continued firing and closing range until 2159, when the target disappeared from the radar screen.

It appeared that the submarine either had no sound equipment or was not manning it and that it was taken completely by surprise. Our ships sighted no torpedoes, received no return gunfire, and observed no increase in speed from the dead slow at which the enemy craft was first tracked. After the craft had disappeared from the radar screens, both destroyer divisions conducted a thorough sound search of the area in which it had disappeared. Although the search was continued by the five destroyers until 2300, a whole hour, no sound contact was made. The search had to be abandoned at that time. The following morning at 0740, however, the squadron returned to the spot and sailed through the waters in which the action took place. A large amount of oil and debris was found on the water. The oil slick, samples of which were obtained, covered an area of about one square mile. Among the debris were many cork particles, life jackets, some lumber, a ladder, and two wooden fish tubs. It was concluded that the submarine was destroyed by gunfire.

## AIR ATTACKS

Estimating the situation at 2300, after the sound search for the submarine, Capt. Burke concluded that time could not permit the patrol toward Rabaul on the scale originally planned and that the patrol would have to be considerably curtailed. At 2300 course 350° T. was taken and the squadron formed with Division 46 on a line of bearing 220° T. from Division 45. Speed was increased to 28 knots as soon as the squadron was formed.

A large group of bogies, the first contacted during the night, had passed to the south at a distance of 25 miles

at 2215 but had not closed the destroyer squadron. At 2317 the night fighter assigned to the squadron was identified at a distance of 19 miles. His arrival was timely, for it was soon apparent that the formation had been at last discovered by the snoopers. One bogey came in from the northwest and was fired on by the *Converse* and *Stanly* at 2332, though he retired undamaged. Fifteen minutes later at least four bogeys were in the vicinity at ranges from nine to thirteen miles. Since an attack seemed to be brewing, the destroyers were ordered to take 700 yards' distance to permit maneuvering space.

A torpedo attack was soon indicated. At 0101 the *Converse* reported two bogeys bearing  $350^{\circ}$  T., distance nine miles, and the *Charles F. Ausburne* soon picked them up as  $335^{\circ}$  T., distance six miles, coming in fast and low. Both divisions were maneuvered on signal left the right and headed directly for the attacking planes as the ships opened fire. Firing was accurate and some of the planes were shot down. The remaining planes retired without dropping any bombs or torpedoes. The ships ceased firing at 0103.

Shortly after the firing had ceased, ComDesDiv 46, Comdr. Austin, reported that he saw a "ship" on the port bow of the *Converse*, bearing about  $270^{\circ}$  T. While there was no radar confirmation of this sighting all ships could see dark objects in the direction indicated. Course was changed to close this phenomenon, and at 0105 the *Converse* opened fire. The *Stanly* suggested that the targets were barges, Comdr. Austin that they were planes shot down during the attack, and all hands agreed that there were long, low objects on the water. Before accurate identification could be made the objects disappeared. Since smoke was seen blowing away from the area, however, it was believed that what had been sighted were some of the attacking planes shot down by the squadron.

To compensate for the diversion to the west, the ships came right to  $000^{\circ}$  T. at 0112. Several bogies remained on the screen, but for the half hour that followed they let the squadron alone. At 0141 ships again changed course by division columns to  $019^{\circ}$  T. From this time until after the bombardment the force was continually plagued by bogies. One especially seemed to be maneuvering to attack, but instead, dropped green flares to port. The first night fighter had retired for lack of gas and at 0230 was relieved by a second, which circled the formation in a vain effort to intercept enemy planes.

The squadron maneuvered on various courses to approach Buka from the northwest, the bearing of Rabaul, and changed to the final approach course,  $105^{\circ}$  T., at 0315, the two division in simple column, their bombardment formation. A few minutes later antiaircraft fire was observed over Buka, indicating that the scheduled air attack was already in progress. There was no longer any hope of an undiscovered approach for the bombardment. The moon was still very bright and the ships stood out plainly on a glassy sea. Any doubt in the mind of the enemy about the squadron's approach was dissipated when snoopers were taken under fire shortly before turning to the bombardment course.

At 0345 three bogies converged upon the formation. The *Charles F. Ausburne*, leading ship, swung right to  $142^{\circ}$  T. and opened fire, followed by the other ships. Almost immediately three surface contacts were reported on the *Ausburne*'s SG radar at ranges between 7,000 and 9,510 yards, about the range and bearing of the targets. The surface contacts had zero speed and were giving off smoke. It was believed that these contacts

were attacking planes shot down by gunfire, a conclusion further strengthened by the complete absence of air attack during our bombardment.

## BOMBARDMENT OF BUKA

About ten minutes before reaching the firing position, which was abeam of Sale Island, a modified zigzag plan was adopted in order to throw off shore batteries. When abeam of Sale Island, *Claxton*, *Dyson*, and *Converse* were to commence firing, while the *Ausburne* and *Stanly* were to withhold their fire a few minutes to be available for immediate action against enemy surface vessels, shore batteries, and snoopers. If no such opposition were encountered, these ships were assigned targets ashore. Targets were assigned as follows: *Ausburne*, counter battery and the right side of Buka field; *Claxton* during the first half, southern revetments, in the second half, Buka field; *Dyson*, Buka field; *Converse* during the first half, northern revetments, second half, Buka field; *Stanly*, counter battery fire and the left side of Buka field. Ammunition allowances for the shore bombardment were made flexible—100 to 150 rounds per gun. The bombardment track was on a line 160° T. parallel to the west coast and the outlying island off Buka.

The guide ship came to firing course 160° T. at 0355 and began zigzagging. Our planes had retired from the air attack by this time. At 0416½ speed was reduced to 18 knots, and at 0418 fire was opened at a navigational range of 15,600 yards, bearing 088° T. Since shore batteries were "strangely silent," the *Ausburne* and *Stanly*, which had held their fire in order to deal with such batteries, joined in the bombardment at 0423. Some splashes from enemy batteries were observed, but they were well over and about on the firing course used by the squadron on a previous bombardment. No torpedo boats sortied to give battle, and no bogies menaced the force.

The accuracy of fire was praised by the Black Cat spotter, whose assistance in keeping shots going into the assigned areas was pronounced valuable. Volume of fire was excellent and steady, with practically all fire being five gun salvos. No personnel casualties were reported and all material functioned well, with only minor casualties. The spotter reported that he observed many hits on the runway and revetments, one large fire started, and an ammunition dump blown up.

Since the firing track lay within uncharted waters, a close watch was kept on sound gear in order to avoid reefs and shoals. At 0435½ a reef was picked up dead ahead on the *Ausburne*'s sound gear at a distance of 1,700 yards. The ship came hard right, ceased firing, and ordered the *Claxton* to turn simultaneously. The *Stanly* fired a few salvos at coastal batteries on Sohana Island. The rest of the squadron, toward the end of the bombardment, opened up briefly on Katitz Island to the southeast, where a fairly large explosion was observed.

By 0445 the bombardment was completed and the Squadron took course 220° T., increasing speed to 29 knots. All hands were expecting an air attack. At 0453 at the *Converse* reported five bogies coming in bearing 270° T., distance five miles. A float light was dropped on the port bow of the flagship as all ships turned to 270° T. The oncoming planes were taken under fire at 0455, but without observed results. Many bogies were still in the vicinity when the formation returned to the retirement course. Ships opened fire from time to time when

a bogey came too near. No bombs or torpedoes were reported dropped, however, and by 0515 the bogies were retiring. At that time the squadron took the final retirement course to 190° T., heading for the scene of the antisubmarine action of the night before.

Throughout the two following days Squadron 23 covered the supply echelons at Empress Augusta Bay and the Treasury Islands during their unloading, departure, and retirement. During the night of the 17th many bogies appeared, some of which were fired upon. No damage was inflicted upon the squadron or the convoys, however, and no planes were believed shot down. Without further incident, Squadron 23 arrived in Purvis Bay at 0600 on 19 November.

## THE LOSS OF THE *McKEAN* 17 NOVEMBER

While Destroyer Squadron 23, under Capt. Burke, was operating to the northwest as surface covering force and fighting off air attacks on the night of 16–17 November, the Fifth Echelon to Empress Augusta Bay, moving forward from the southeast, was having its own difficulties with bogies. This echelon, organized as a task group under the command of Capt. Grayson B. Carter, consisted of two transport divisions of APD's, eight LST's, and a destroyer squadron as a screening force. This group was organized as follows:

Task Group Carter, Capt. Grayson B. Carter

Transport Division 12, Comdr. John D. Sweeney

*Stringham* (F), Lt. Comdr. Ralph H. Moureau

*McKean*, Lt. Comdr. Ralph L. Ramey

*Talbot*, Lt. Comdr. Charles C. Morgan

*Waters*, Lt. Comdr. Charles J. McWhinnie.

Transport Division 22, Comdr. Robert H. Wilkinson

*Kilty* (F), Lieut. John W. Coolidge

*Crosby*, Lieut. William E. Sims

*Ward*, Lt. Comdr. James R. Cain, Jr.

*Schley*, Lt. Comdr. Horace Myers

LST Flotilla 5, Capt. Grayson B. Carter

LST's 70, 207, 339, 341, 353, 354, 395, 488.

Destroyer Squadron 22 (Screening), Capt. Jack E. Hurff

Destroyer Division 43, Capt. Jack E. Hurff

*Waller* (FF), Lt. Comdr. William T. Dutton

*Saufley*, Comdr. Bert F. Brown

*Pringle*, Lt. Comdr. George DeMetropolis

*Renshaw* (FF, TGC), Lt. Comdr. Jacob A. Lark

Destroyer Division 44, Comdr. James R. Pahl

*Conway* (F), Lt. Comdr. Harold G. Bowen, Jr.

*Sigourney*, Comdr. Walter L. Dyer

Capt. Carter left the Kukum and Tassafaronga area with the eight LST's and the screening destroyers about 0700 on 15 November. Three of the LST's floated barrage balloons. Rendezvous with Transport Divisions 12 and 22 was made south of Simbo Island at dawn on the 16th, and the eight APD's were placed as an inner antiaircraft and antisubmarine screen around the LST formation. The destroyers were placed as an outer screen around the formation. The tug *Pawnee* joined up at 0800. Expecting air attack, Capt. Carter ordered a smoke screen test before the APD's joined up. It was found that effective smoke cover was not achieved, since the barrage balloons, even though close-hauled, were not concealed by the smoke. It was decided that the ships would depend upon their balloon barrage and guns, instead of the smoke screen, for protection.

The passage was uneventful until about 0300 on 17 November. At that time the formation was on course 037° T., entering Empress Augusta Bay. The moon was bright, the sea calm, with light winds and good visibility. Convoy speed was nine knots. At 0250 antiaircraft fire and searchlights were observed on the bearing of Cape Torokina, the first indication of bogies in the area. Fifteen minutes later the *Talbot* reported that she had seen five planes pass overhead, and from that time forth the air was filled with reports of bogies.

At 0320 a Betty that had circled the formation came in close aboard the *Pringle*, maneuvered radically by dipping its wing to avoid colliding with the ship, lost altitude, and nosed into the water. It had not been taken under fire when it crashed. Float lights designed to encircle the formation were now being dropped. Air plot of the Combat Information Center aboard the *Conway* at 0330 plotted at least six planes orbiting at a distance of about five miles, and reported that may have been as many as eight or nine planes.

Ships of the formation were ordered to take the sectors for air attack at 0335. At that time the *Conway* sighted a plane coming in on her starboard bow. The ship opened fire on the plane when it was about 500 yards' distance and near zero target angle. The plane, identified as a Betty, was hit in its left wing, banked steeply, and crashed in the water aflame some 500 yards astern. It was assumed that the pilot had been knocked out by our 20-mm. fire. The ships at that time were about 12 miles bearing 225° T. from Cape Torokina. Another Betty was taken under fire by LST 207 at 0337. The plane burst into flames, passed over the vessel, veered off to the right and crashed into the water two points off her port bow at a distance of 300 yards. Another plane was shot down at 0342 by the fire of several vessels to the rear of the formation.

Observers aboard the *McKean* saw a plane at 0345 apparently making a torpedo run on the *Talbot*. At 0347, however, the plane, a single-engine, carrier-type Val torpedo plane, turned sharply to the right and headed directly for the *McKean*, then on course 075° T. Her commanding officer, Lt. Comdr. Ramey, ordered full right rudder to swing the ship's stern toward the attacking plane, but there was not sufficient time for the ship to respond. The plane launched a torpedo at about 300 yards, one point on the starboard quarter of the *McKean*. The ship was kept swinging to the left and the torpedo appeared to be passing astern. The plane banked to the right and paralleled the ship at a distance of 2,000 yards, altitude 50 feet. The four starboard 20-mm. guns were firing continuously at point blank range when the plane lost altitude and spun into the water ahead of the ship.

In the meantime, the commanding officer had ordered rudder shifted full right. At 0350 the ship was struck by a torpedo which exploded near frame 140 on the starboard side. Immediately the after magazine and the depth charge stowage went up in a terrific explosion. These explosions ruptured after bulkheads of D-101, D-102, and D-103 fuel oil tanks and threw flaming oil over the entire after part of the ship. All four landing boats immediately burst into flame from the after engine room hatches, indicating that the forward bulkhead of the D tanks had been carried away, starting large fires in the after engine room.

The entire ship aft of the No. 1 stack was a raging mass of flames, so that from the initial explosion it was impossible to go aft of that point, or for any one aft of the No. 1 stack to go forward. All light and power was lost from the first, and communication with the after part of the ship was impossible. Falling debris pressed down the siren cord, setting up a continuous blast. All personnel aft are believed to have perished, or to have been knocked overboard. Only three of those knocked overboard survived.

The forward part of the ship was intact and on an even keel. Discipline was reported to have been perfect, and the captain and officers went about their duties with efficiency. Marines in the troop space came on deck, however, and began abandoning ship without orders. Several jumped overboard in life jackets and were dragged into the burning oil slick where they burned to death. The commanding officer ordered the four well-deck life rafts lowered, which was done without panic or confusion. Minor explosions throughout the after part of the ship were felt, and the ship's head started to fall off to starboard. Crew members took stations along the life lines awaiting orders to abandon ship. When all forward motion stopped and the vessel started to go down by the stern at 0400, the commanding officer commenced clearing the ship of all personnel. Lines and fire hose were rigged over the side to facilitate loading of life rafts.

After inspecting the forward part of the ship to see that no one remained who was not on his feet or on topside, the captain at 0410 ordered all hands over the side, every man for himself. At 0412, believing the vessel no longer safe, the captain went over the port side of the well deck. Three minutes later the diesel oil tank and the forward magazine exploded almost simultaneously, disintegrating the forward part of the ship. At 0418 the stacks, last of the vessel afloat, settled in the water. The position of the sinking was latitude 06° 31' 15" S., longitude 154° 51' 30" E. Three members of the troop detachment and one member of the ship's crew were injured by concussion when the forward magazine exploded. Two depth charges exploded under water, but at such a depth as to cause no damage to men in the water.

The captain observed many heroic attempts on the part of his officers and men to save those in danger of burning or drowning. He believed that the number of survivors was materially increased by the whole-hearted cooperation of all hands in getting badly burned or injured men aboard life rafts. There were repeated instances of self-sacrifice to assist the injured or exhausted swimmers.

The task force commander ordered the *Talbot*, adjacent APD in the inner screen, to investigate the results of the explosion observed on the *McKean* and to undertake rescue work with her landing boats. The *Waller* and *Sigourney* later joined in the rescue with their whale boats.

In the meantime, the air attack continued unabated during the rescue period. Ships continued firing on incoming planes. The *Sigourney* shot down one on her port bow, and believed that her 5-inch guns scored a direct hit on another. According to the captain of this ship, "the enemy planes concentrated in the area around the wrecked *McKean*." At one time as many as four planes were making separate, simultaneous runs on the *Sigourney*. Several bombs were dropped and some torpedoes were reported. The action was "a night melee, with planes coming from all sides."

While the *Sigourney* and the *Waller* picked up as many survivors as they could with their whale boats, the bulk of the rescue work was done by the landing boats of the *Talbot*. Rescue was continued until after sunrise. In all, 90 survivors of the *McKean*'s crew were picked up, 19 of whom were wounded, of whom one later died of his injuries. Listed as missing in action were three officers and sixty enlisted men. Of 185 Marine officers and enlisted personnel (attached to the 3rd Battalion, 21st Marines) who were embarked as passengers at the time of the sinking, 133 were survivors, and 52 were reported missing in action.

## DAYLIGHT AIR ATTACK

Air cover, requested earlier, arrived on station at 0600 and was vectored out by the fighter director ship *Pringle*. An attempt to intercept retiring bogies was not successful. In the meantime, the LST's had proceeded to the unloading area at Torokina and Puruata Island, and by 0651 all of them were beached and in the process of unloading.

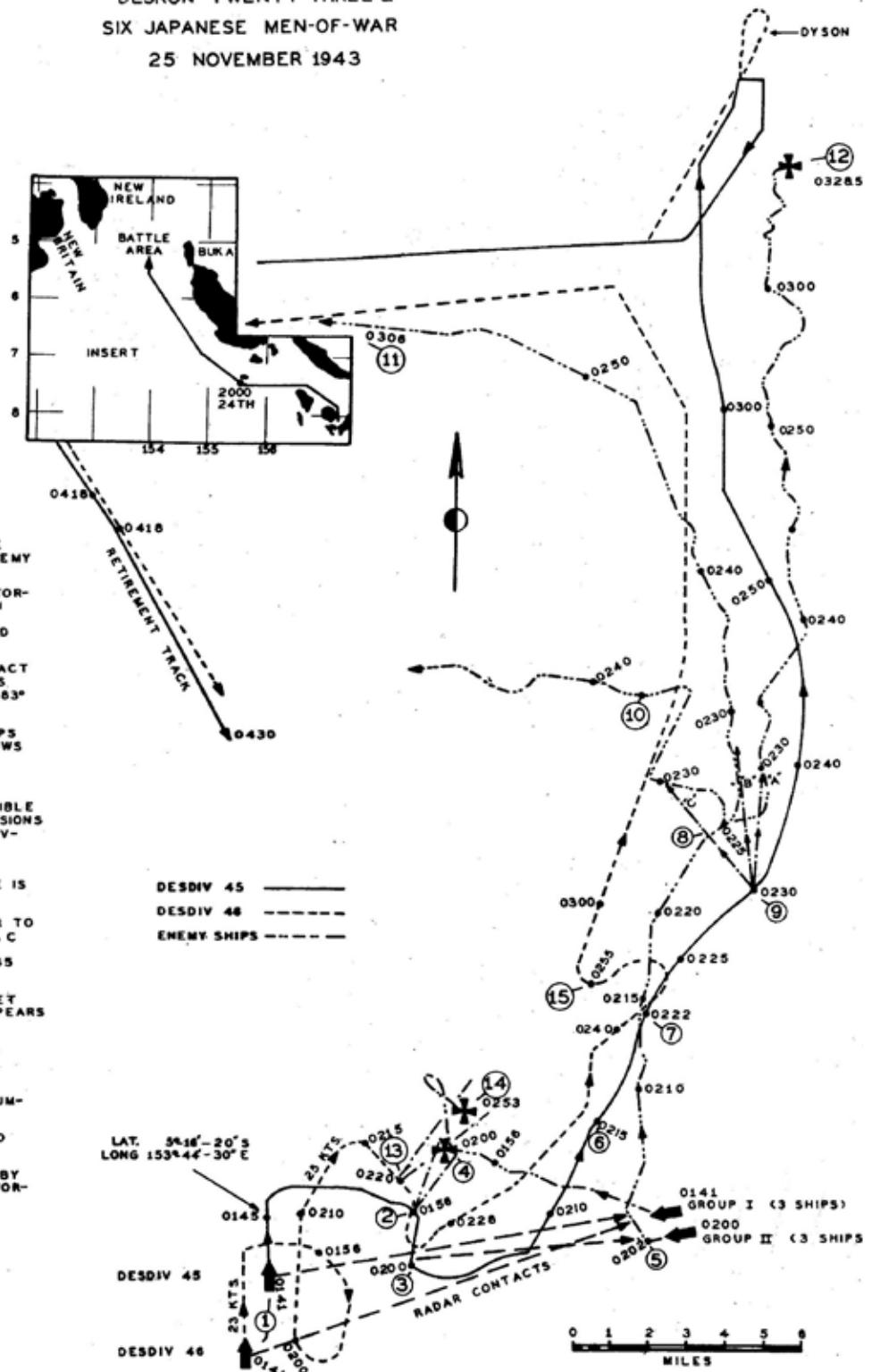
About ten minutes after the LST's were beached a single enemy plane came in at a very high altitude, undetected by any ships or shore batteries, and dropped on bomb which fell 200 yards off the port quarter of LST 341, causing no damage. Receiving report at 0726 of a large bogey closing from 80 miles to the northwest, the fighter director aboard the *Pringle* vectored two flights of the air cover to intercept and informed all other flights instructing them to orbit 20 miles to the northwest in the path of the oncoming raid. Although merged plots appeared continually on the screen after 0747, no "tally-ho" were reported by any of our flights. For all the *Pringle* fighter director knew, the raid was coming in un-intercepted.

At 0754 the *Conway*, then three miles bearing 140° T. from Cape Torokina, identified a Val dive bomber coming in on the starboard bow, trailing a bluish-white exhaust. He dropped three bombs that fell some 1,000 yards away. While the attention of a good part of the topside personnel was occupied by the single plane, evidently sent in to direct attention, three other Vals came in from almost dead ahead to make shallow dives on the *Conway* with zero target angle. The first Val dropped three bombs that missed astern by a mere 30 to 50 feet. As a result of the explosions the ship heaved up and down violently, but apparently sustained no damage. One of the other planes dropped two or three bombs about 3,000 yards ahead of the ship and the other appeared to drop a stick of bombs 500 yards to the starboard. All these planes were taken under fire by the *Conway* without observed results.

At about the same time the LST's beached at Cape Torokina and Puruata Island were attacked by some six Japanese dive bombers. The planes were taken under fire, but never came within full effective range of the 20-mm. or .50 caliber machine guns. They did not appear to be eager to press home their attacks at low altitude and did not descend below about 2,000 feet. This reluctance was attributed to the balloon barrage flown by the LST's. One of the planes taken under fire was seen to maneuver violently to avoid collision with a balloon that had been released when the antiaircraft fire of one of the LST's severed its mooring cable. Observers were divided as to whether the plane crashed into the sea as the result of gunfire or of collision with the balloon cable. At any rate no ship flying a balloon was brought under attack, and it was believed that the balloon barrage was responsible for the ineffectiveness of the attack. Friendly planes were fired on by the LST's, but none was hit.

At 0814 another large bogey appeared to be closing from the northwest, distance of 30 miles, and planes were vectored to make interception. Neither then nor earlier did pilots report any tally-ho. It was learned later, however, that both bogies had been intercepted, and that our fighters had accounted for six Zekes and Haps. One of our planes came in and "pancaked" near the destroyers, another crashed near land where its pilots was rescued, and a third was shot down at sea. By 0824 the bogies were retiring. No more appeared in the area during daylight that day.

BATTLE OFF CAPE ST. GEORGE  
NIGHT SURFACE ENGAGEMENT  
BETWEEN  
DESRON TWENTY THREE &  
SIX JAPANESE MEN-OF-WAR  
25 NOVEMBER 1943



## BOMBARDMENT OF THE JABA RIVER AREA

Toward noon of the same day, 17 November, Destroyer Division 44, Comdr. James R. Pahl, consisting of the *Conway* and *Sigourney*, carried out a scheduled bombardment of a small area around the mouth of the Jaba River, below Cape Torokina about half way down the shore of Empress Augusta Bay. Targets were to include gun emplacements, trenches and other defenses, and a bivouac area in a nearby coconut grove.

Lt. Col. F. F. Henderson, USMC, of the staff of the commanding general of the I Marine Amphibious Corps, and Lt. (jg) J. Mannotti, USNR, Naval Gun Liaison Officer, were taken aboard the *Conway* at 0843 to assist in this enterprise. They brought with them the bombardment plan, together with the necessary photographs and maps to assist the proper selection of targets. PT 104, the officers of which were familiar with the shoals of the area through which the destroyer would pass en route to and during the bombardment, was supplied the division to assist in navigation.

At 0930 the *Conway* and *Sigourney* in column, with PT 104 in the van, began their approach to the bombardment area. All went smoothly until the time for the bombardment to begin. Then no one could contact the spotting plane on the assigned voice frequency. The bombardment was delayed in hope that contact might be made. Finally, after all attempts to make contact with the two spotting planes present had failed, it was decided to bombard such targets near the beach as could be observed from aboard ship. Firing was begun at 1121 on course 180° T., speed five knots. The point at which firing was commenced was 7.5 miles, bearing 135° T., from Cape Torokina.

After two spotting planes had departed without establishing communications, a third plane appeared and did succeed in making satisfactory voice contact. Since this pilot did not have the opportunity to study the relevant charts, and since it did not seem feasible to describe the targets to him from the ships, his help was not available. Lt. Col. Henderson indicated that this was only a strategical bombardment not associated with any immediate tactical situation. It was therefore agreed to limit the bombardment to three targets on the beach in sight and one general bivouac area not visible, but to which the guns could be readily adjusted from a visible target. With ammunition limited to a maximum of 450 rounds, the bombardment proceeded. At 1252 the bombardment was completed and was pronounced entirely satisfactory by Lt. Col. Henderson. The ships then retired toward Torokina, where they assisted in screening the unloading of LST's. The remaining part of the mission of Task Force Carter was carried out without mishap.

## THE BATTLE OF CAPE ST. GEORGE 24-25 NOVEMBER

In the latter phase of the Solomon Islands Campaign, when the enemy no longer dared commit major surface units in this area, surface actions were increasingly confined to night actions between destroyer forces. They occurred usually in association with Japanese evacuations movements---evacuations of Kolombangara, Vella Lavella, Choiseul—which the destroyer unites were sent to cover. Such night engagements had been fought in Kula Gulf, in Vella Gulf, and in the waters north and east of Vella Lavella. Our destroyer captains had developed a spirit of aggressiveness that made them formidable in those actions. The last and most successful of them, the Battle of Cape St. George, was a classic of its kind. A squadron of five destroyers encountered a superior Japanese force of six vessels, including one cruiser, sank four of them and probably sank a fifth, without incurring any damage or casualties. It was not unfitting that it should have been fought by Destroyer Squadron 23, a unit that had figured in much of the action of the campaign.

For this action the squadron was organized as follows:

Destroyer Squadron 23, Capt. Arleigh A. Burke

Destroyer Division 45, Capt. Burke

*Charles F. Ausburne* (FF), Comdr. Luther K. Reynolds

*Dyson*, Comdr. Roy A. Gano

*Claxton*, Comdr. Harold F. Stout

Destroyer Division 46, Comdr. Bernard L. Austin

*Converse* (F), Comdr. DeWitt C. E. Hamberger

*Spence*, Comdr. Henry J. Armstrong, Jr.

Operating directly under Commander Third Fleet, Admiral Halsey, Squadron 23 had been engaged for three days in covering supply echelon movements to Empress Augusta Bay and mining activities off Shortland Island. These operations had been started at 1245 on 22 November by urgent orders that required the squadron to depart Purvis Bay, Florida Island, on short notice in order to patrol the enemy's Rabaul-Buka supply line. As a result of the long 370-mile run at high speed, it was necessary to return at 31 knots and refuel at Hawthorn Sound in the Rabaul area the following day. The squadron returned on the 23d to the same area and retired to Hathorn Sound again at 31 knots. On neither night did the destroyers make contact with any enemy force.

The Japanese airfield on Buka Island had been undergoing almost daily air bombing since 13 November, and during that time had been kept inoperative. It was suspected by our intelligence that the Japanese were on the point of making an attempt to evacuate technically trained personnel from the area by night.

Squadron 23 was refueling in Hathorn Sound at noon on the 24th when a dispatch arrived from admiral Halsey directing Capt. Burke to speed up the fueling and return to point "Uncle," southwest of Empress Augusta Bay, from which he was to proceed later to "take care" of evacuation forces from Buka. The squadron commander reported that he would arrive at the specified point about 2200 by a route south of Treasury Island. A later dispatch, which the Admiral addressed to "Thirty-one knot Burke," contained the

squadron's orders for the night, directing the captain to place himself athwart the Buka-Rabaul evacuation line about 35 miles west of Buka. In case the enemy were contacted, said the Admiral, "you know what to do."

In his earlier dispatch, Admiral Halsey had ordered Commander III Amphibious Force, Admiral Wilkinson, to operate all the PT boats he could muster as far north as Queen Carola Island at the northern end of Buka. Also, ComAirSoPac, Maj. Gen. Mitchell was directed to maintain continuous reconnaissance of the Buka-St. George Channel route, and to provide a Black Cat and day fighter cover for Destroyer Squadron 23. It was later arranged that a night fighter would be over the squadron from 0330 to 0515 and that the day cover of eight fighters would report on station at 0600. The squadron commander was warned that a friendly plane would be operating in the same area, "loaded for a kill," and that IFF should be used liberally.

## PREPARATIONS AND APPROACH

"This job," remarked Capt. Burke, "was another one which every destroyer sailor likes to have." The squadron would be operating in waters hitherto controlled by the enemy, where all contacts would be unmistakably Japanese. The force was powerful enough to deal with any surface craft it was likely to encounter, and its orders were elastic enough to permit cruising in waters where contact with the enemy was most likely. It was believed that the Japanese would use high speed combatant vessels, since they had successfully accomplished evacuations by this means in the past. Sufficient air cover was provided to furnish protection from the air attacks that were always to be expected. "There was nothing left to be desired," said the captain, "except an enemy contact." The latter would depend in good part upon luck, and with this the squadron seemed well supplied from the start.

There was little time for making plans and none at all for holding a conference of division commanders and destroyer captains. Capt. Burke planned to fuel as quickly as possible, then to proceed at maximum speed to the Rabaul-Buka route. He wished to strike that route as far west as possible, probably 55 miles west of Buka by 0145. From there his course lay due north for five miles at a speed of 23 knots, then southeast on course 113° T. to a point 30 miles west of Buka by 0300. If no contacts were made by that time, retirement would be commenced. These intentions were passed on to the ships' captains by TBS later while they were on their way north.

Every effort was made to speed up the fueling at Hathorn Sound. Inboard ships were directed to handle outboard ships' hoses, and ships coming alongside were kept 1,000 yards astern and pointed towards the barge when ships alongside the barge at the time were ready to depart. The time thus saved turned out later to be of vital importance. By 1230 Division 46, (the *Converse* and *Spence*), had completed fueling and was ordered by the squadron commander to conduct an antisubmarine search at 20 knots along the prospective track of the squadron. The three remaining ships then fell to with fueling. The *Ausburne* and *Claxton*, having completed fueling, stood out to Kula Gulf at 1515, speed 25 knots, leaving orders for the *Dyson* to follow at maximum speed. She joined up at 1650, and Division 46, overtaken later, fell in astern of Division 45 at 1730, as the squadron was rounding Vella Lavella.

No incident of importance interrupted the passage before midnight, although several bogies that did not close the squadron were reported. The *Spence*, which was steaming on three boilers, found that her maximum speed was 31.8 knots. At 2300 and again at midnight Plane 1 of Flight 23 made two reports of contacts with craft of doubtful identification at about latitude 06° 25' S., longitude 154° 30' E. At the time these reports were received, the squadron was well north of this position, and it had passed close to the reported position without itself making any contact. The squadron commander believed that the plane was probably in error, which turned out to be the case. At any rate, bent on finding larger game, Capt. Burke decided that he was not going back to investigate these possible contacts.

At 0100 it was discovered that the squadron was some 10 minutes ahead of its scheduled position of that time. The squadron commander then decided to continue to the west farther than the position previously selected on the chart. As it turned out this decision, made largely by chance, meant the difference between the failure and success of the mission. As a matter of fact, the chain of chance was a protracted one. "The time of 0145 for reaching the Rabaul-Buka line was chosen nearly at random," remarked Capt. Burke. "The desire to reach as far westward as possible was not based on abstruse reasoning. A fifteen-minute delay in time of fueling, the run north at anything less than maximum speed, an investigation of false surface contacts, an attack by bogies which would have required maneuvering, the reporting of our force by bogies which would have alerted Japanese surface vessels, all or any would have prevented the battle from being fought. We reached the enemy by the narrowest of margins."

The squadron slowed to 23 knots at 0130 and at 0140 changed course to north, the 46th Division taking line of bearing 225° T. from Division 45, distance 5,000 yards. The ships were now far into enemy waters and steaming athwart the line of evacuation from Buka. It was a dark night, "an ideal night for a nice quiet torpedo attack," the squadron commander observed. There was a heavy overcast accompanied by frequent rain squalls, and no moon. Wakes were visible at about 3,000 yards with binoculars.

At 0141, one minute after the squadron changed course to north, the *Dyson*, *Spence*, and *Claxton* reported surface contacts bearing 085°, distance 22,000 yards. Capt. Burke's order preparing the squadron to give battle was: "Hang on to your hats, boys, here we go."

## INITIAL TORPEDO ATTACK

Division 45 was ordered to change course to 085° T. at 0143 to head directly for the enemy, while Division 46, according to squadron doctrine, was instructed to hold back until it got its proper bearing of 225° from Division 45 and to support its torpedo attack. The enemy was tracked on a westerly course at a speed of about 25 knots. The distance of eleven miles at the point of original contact was closed rapidly during the next 13 minutes as the two opposing forces steamed directly toward each other.

Information on course and speed of the contact, which soon separated on the radar screen into three targets, was exchanged between ships as they closed for attack. When the range had closed to about four miles, Comdr. Austin, commander of Division 46, proposed that he cross under the stern of Division 45, to cover its

other side, but was directed to stay where he was. He agreed reluctantly, remarking, "that will keep me out of the show." Squadron doctrine was thus adhered to and both divisions were kept on the same side of the enemy, out of our own torpedo water, with the supporting division prepared instantly to carry on the attack in the event the attacking division was drawn off by the sudden appearance of additional enemy forces.

By column movements, Division 45 maneuvered so that a torpedo firing point about  $50^{\circ}$  on the port bow of the enemy, distance 4,500 yards, could be reached. Just as Capt. Burke was about to give the order to fire torpedoes, the communication officer rushed up to the bridge waving a dispatch from the Black Cat reporting enemy ships in the immediate vicinity. He was instructed, "To hell with it." Its contents were not examined until after the battle. The desired firing point having been reached at 0156, the divisions fired one-half salvo. Torpedoes were set at six feet with one degree spread, intermediate speed. Expecting the enemy to return the torpedo attack as soon as he saw the flashes of our torpedo tubes, Division 45 immediately increased speed to 30 knots and retired by ships turn movement  $90^{\circ}$  to the right.

In the meantime, the targets, apparently unwarned by the flashes from our torpedo tubes, steamed on unsuspectingly upon a straight course, without changing speed and without returning fire with guns or torpedoes. Low visibility and the reduced speed (23 knots) of the attacking force, combined with the advantages of our SG radar, had apparently achieved a complete surprise. To Comdr. Reynolds of the *Ausburne*, it looked like "a destroyer officer's dream."

There was a wait of four and one-half minutes while the torpedoes completed their run, then a series of violent explosions at 0200½ indicating many hits. The explosions were seen on all three targets, which were 700 to 1,000 yards apart. On two of the targets the explosions were tremendous, flames mounting several hundred feet in the air and casting a red glow far into the dark night. One of the ships disintegrated immediately, sending up a huge ball of fire some 300 feet into the air and illuminating much falling debris. A second ship exploded and burned with a great fire, though broken in two, with bow and stern floating separately. The third target, on which the explosion was smaller, slowed, turned north, and began to circle.

## PURSUIT OF SECOND ENEMY GROUP

At 0159, one and a half minutes before the first of these explosions, the squadron flagship *Ausburne* picked up on her SG radar a second group of three enemy ships bearing due east,  $090^{\circ}$  T., range 13,470 yards. The squadron commander immediately addressed the commander of Division 46 over TBS: "We have second target bearing east from us. Polish off first targets fired on. Watch yourselves now, don't get separated from one another and don't get too far away. We're going after a new target." Comdr. Austin replied, "Wilco," and quickly brought his destroyers around to the north to close the first targets.

Division 45, which had been steaming south since turning away from the first target group, came left to  $120^{\circ}$  T., when before reaching that course was ordered to come to  $090^{\circ}$  T., a course leading directly to the oncoming second enemy group. It was Capt. Burke's intention that time to get into position to launch another torpedo attack. But before he could reach such a position, his first salvos found their mark and the series of

tremendous explosions began on the first three targets. Observing this disaster, and probably sighting division 45 during the resulting illumination, the second Japanese group at once changed course to north by a ships' turn movement and increased speed to maximum. The enemy, however, did not open fire at this time.

The range of the second targets at the time of their turn to the north was about 11,000 yards, which was too great to justify firing torpedoes at retreating ships. Capt. Burke therefore changed course again as the enemy withdrew on a course a little east of north. He also increased speed to 31 knots, which necessitated 33 knots on the third ship in the column. Thus began a long pursuit in an effort to bring the enemy within range.

At intervals during these rapid developments the Combat Information Center of the Ausburne had been reporting contacts on an enemy plane hovering over the area. Preoccupied with other matters, Capt. Burke decided that the division "had a great deal more to do than handle bogies" and forthwith instructed the CIC, "To hell with the bogies," and ordered that no report was to be made of single bogies during the battle. Fortunately, the enemy plane, although nearby and closing range when last reported, caused the squadron as trouble and was not in the vicinity at the close of the action.

Unable to close range on the second group as fast as he desired, Capt. Burke ordered "all turns the engineers could make." The enemy ships were accelerating speed at the same time and gradually opening distance between ships, all three of which were now easily distinguishable by radar, about 1,000 yards apart in a rough wedge formation. At 0207 Division 45 came to course 030°. The targets at that time were on course 020° T., changing left to 000° T., speed 25 knots, bearing 042° T., range 9,260 yards. Gradually we reduced the range to about 8,000 yards, and at 0209 Capt. Burke ordered the division to stand by to fire torpedoes, hoping that range could be reduced sufficiently to make the attack possible. The division was zigzagging only slightly in order to make the best time possible. The enemy group at 0210 began to split up and zigzag on a base course of about 000° T., meanwhile increasing speed to between 28 and 30 knots. We were still unable to close to effective torpedo range, however, though steaming at about maximum speed.

At 0215 Capt. Burke, "on a hunch," ordered a radical change of course to the right in order to avoid possible enemy torpedoes. The division promptly came right, steadied on 060° T., and about one minute later came back to 015° T. No sooner had the ships steadied on the latter course than three heavy explosions were felt by all the ships. They were so heavy that the ships were badly jarred, and Capt. Burke could not resist looking to see whether the bow of his flagship was still there. Each of the two destroyers astern believed that one of the other ships of the division had been torpedoed. Fortunately, none of the ships was hit, and it was concluded that the explosions were Japanese torpedoes detonated at the end of their run or as they crossed the wakes of the division. The squadron commander believed it possible that his "hunch" to order a jog to the right may have taken the division out of torpedo water.

## GUNFIRE

A pursuit of more than 15 minutes had not closed range sufficiently for a torpedo attack, and during the last ten minutes of the chase no appreciable gain had been made. Capt. Burke therefore ordered the division at 0217: "Take station left echelon. Cannot catch these sons of bitches so will open up with gun fire as soon as

you are open." By 0222 all ships were in proper formation, and the order was given to open fire, each ship firing her two forward guns. The *Ausburne* fired at target "A" bearing 014° T., range 7,600 yards, *Dyson* at target "C" bearing 025° T., range 8,100 yards, and *Claxton* at target "B" bearing 020 T., range 8,310 yards. The ships were ordered to fishtail sufficiently to throw off the enemy's gunfire.<sup>9</sup>

The enemy immediately began making several changes of course and covering his retreat with a great amount of smoke, either purposely as a smoke screen or incidental to his operations. He also began to return our fire. Enemy fire, as usual, was in small patterns with the salvos well grouped. Some enemy salvos landed short, some over, and many uncomfortably close. The splashes of short misses kept two inches of water on the *Claxton*'s bridge, and all three destroyers sustained near hits. It was concluded the shells were armor piercing projectiles, since there were no hits from fragments and explosions seemed delayed. For some reason, however, the enemy gunners scored no direct hits. As observed before in such night actions, the Japanese flashless powder was so effective that the origin of no salvos could be sighted.

Our ships observed hits on their targets almost from the first salvo, but the hits seemed to have no effect. No fires were observed, and the targets did not slow. "We seemed to be conducting a futile gun practice," observed the squadron commander. When Capt. Burke opened fire and kept it up at constant range, he expected the enemy to turn toward him and "slug it out." "The ranges were short," he observed. "It would have been a point blank battle, and the advantages of our radars would have been lessened." However, in spite of the fact that the opposing forces were equal, three ships on each side, the enemy showed no desire for a slugging match. "There is one thing to be said for the Japanese," remarked the Captain. "When they make up their minds to run, they let nothing interfere with the carrying out of their decision. Considering the reported Japanese traits, this lack of willingness to fight an equal force is not understood."

At 0225 the three targets separated on different courses, diverging some 45°. The fastest of the three was heading on a course of 350° T., which was apparently the base course, and the other two took courses on either side. Target "C" started lagging and turning to the left, bearing 002° T., range 8,500 yards from the *Dyson*. The *Dyson* was ordered to take that target and finish him off.

Since Division 45 was beginning to get out of radar range of Division 46, the squadron commander inquired of Comdr. Austin whether he had finished sinking the remaining targets of the first enemy group. The reply was that there were many explosions on the target but that it was still afloat. He was instructed to "Sink him!" then join up with Division 45, keeping a lookout for "cripples" on the way north.

In the meantime, the target to the left was taking an unmerciful pounding from the *Dyson*'s 5-inch guns. The target was still taking hits, in which the *Claxton* also had some part, when it turned west. It remained under fire for some time, and eventually disappeared off the radar screen, travelling at reduced speed, on fire, and obviously much damaged.

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<sup>9</sup> See track chart on p. XX for identification of targets

Observing that fire from all three ships of Division 45 was slowing down, Capt. Burke appealed over TBS, "Please for Christ sake continue to fire!" As a matter of fact some batteries were having difficulties. All ships had been firing continuously for a long time and for the most part dead ahead. The roof escape hatch of the Ausburne's No. 1 gun was blown off by concussion, causing the loaders great difficulty. Firing dead ahead and into a head-on wind while the ship was making 33 knots, the gun crews found that the 85 points pressure carried on the gas ejector system was not sufficient to expel the gun gases, which were blown down into gun turret after every shot fired. Deafened temporarily by the concussion from gun No. 2 above the open hatch, blinded by flashes, and choking with the stench of fumes, the gun crew nevertheless continued to fire at maximum rate possible until they dropped from exhaustion and were replaced by men from other stations while they were revived. The gun captain's hatch on gun No. 1 of the *Claxton* was also blown off, and the crew continued to work furiously in the mount after it was filled with smoke and burning cork, and even after the light fixtures were shattered and they were left in darkness. The *Claxton*'s fire was reduced at 0227 when the No. 1 gun jammed with a dented cartridge case, which could not be extracted until 0242.

The two enemy ships still headed north, both of which had sustained hits, were zigzagging violently and separating, target "B" bearing off to the northwest. It was decided to keep the biggest of the targets, which was the one that continued north in close pursuit. Both targets to the north were kept under fire, however, as long as they were in range. At 0247 the two targets ahead began to slow, and the division fishtailed to avoid any torpedoes they might have fired. Soon the center target "B" increased speed and headed to the northwest at 32 knots, though it slowed down during its flight to escape and dropped to 26 knots, probably as the result of gunfire from *Claxton*. The last radar contact on this target showed it escaping to the northwest at the same speed.

Between 0253 and 0257 the big target to the north slowed down from a speed of 32 knots to 15 knots. Division 45, which was now devoting its entire attention to that target, began fishtailing to avoid any torpedoes and to bring more guns into play. At 0300 the target took a "second wind" and again increased speed to 31 knots. Capt. Burke had reason to believe, however, that he was "pumping his last resources of energy into his failing system," and that his end was in sight. Fires broke out all over the big ship after repeated hits. At 0305 a great explosion occurred on the target, which began to slow, reducing speed to 22 knots, then to 10 knots, and at 0306½ went dead in the water. Division 45 rapidly overhauled its victim and each ship brought all five guns to bear. At a range of 4,000 to 5,000 yards the destroyers pumped rapid five-gun salvos into the target. Despite repeated exhortations from the squadron commander to "fire at maximum rate," and to "sink this bastard," the target, though aflame and dead in the water, remained afloat. In the meantime, the two crippled targets were escaping to the northwest. Finally, at 0327, Capt. Burke ordered the *Dyson* to "Put five fish into that God damned thing—she won't sink any other way."

The *Dyson* willingly complied with this order, but at 0328½, before her torpedoes had time to reach their mark, the target sank. The squadron commander described the ship as having "a large superstructure which appeared to be big enough for an AK," but since no AK could make better than 31 knots, he suggested that it "may have been a large destroyer or a cruiser."

## THE END OF THE FIRST ENEMY GROUP

While Division 45 was giving chase to the second enemy group, the *Converse* and *Spence* of Division 46 were engaged in finishing off the crippled targets that remained of the first group of ships. At the time of the initial contact Division 46 was on a line of bearing 190° T. from the squadron leader, interval 5,000 yards. In order to remain on the port side of the enemy and thus out of the way of the torpedo attack, the division maneuvered in a wide circle to the south. Then, when ordered to finish off the first group, the division was brought around to a northerly course at 30 knots to close those targets.

The initial torpedo attack had sunk one ship outright, broken a second in two parts, one of which remained afloat, and left the third damaged and moving in tight circles. Division 46 found two radar pips, a large one and a very small one on their screens. After maneuvering into position, 4,600 yards range, bearing 051° T., from the targets, the *Converse* fired a half salvo of torpedoes, while the *Spence* was ordered to stand by prepared to fire in case the *Converse* missed. Two pronounced explosions were heard at the expected time, and the small pip disappeared completely. The larger target, which had been hit by one torpedo from the initial attack, was hit by at least one torpedo from the *Converse*, but remained afloat.

The division was maneuvered to avoid torpedo water, then brought around to open fire with guns. At a range of 5,200 yards the ships opened fire at 0228 and began hitting at once. The fire of both ships was pronounced excellent in both accuracy and volume. The target was quickly set afire. At 0334 two explosions occurred, followed by more explosions and additional fires. Four major explosions took place in the approximate location of the gun turrets. Believing that the target was all but done for and that the division's services were needed farther north with Division 45, Comdr. Austin took a northerly course and inquired of Capt. Burke whether he should join up. He was directed to "sink him," and turned back to complete the work.

At 0258 heavy explosions took place on the battered target, and with five fires burning topsides, it sank and disappeared from the radar screen. The ship was thought to have been a *Yubari* class light cruiser. "One more rising sun has set," reported Comdr. Austin over TBS.

Division 46 then came about and set course to close the other division, which by this time had disappeared off the radar screen on bearing of 020° T. Even TBS contact was lost for a time. Comdr. Austin had been warned to keep a close watch for cripples on his way north but not targets were encountered. Contact with the sister

division was reestablished at 0326 by the assistance of numerous explosions and fires on the target which Division 45 had under fire at that time. Comdr. Austin sent thanks for lighting his way, and reported "all three targets sunk."

## SEARCH FOR ESCAPED TARGETS

By 0334 Squadron 23 was reassembled, and Capt. Burke sent the following message to ComSoPac: "Headed for St. George Channel on course 265° T., usual speed 31 knots. Hope to overtake damaged ships. No damage to us. Repeat, no damage to us."

The pursuit continued without any contacts. The night fighter reported and was taken under control by the *Claxton*. There was some speculation about the availability of ammunition when it was realized that the forward guns of the three ships of Division 45 had fired all the ammunition in their magazines, and were transferring ammunition from the after guns. At 0402, as the southern tip of New Ireland appeared on PPI scopes and the squadron steamed virtually under the noses of the Japanese at their strongest base in the area, there were some spirited exchanges over TBS concerning "availability of fuel oil and anchorage assignments in Rabaul."

The chase was abandoned at 0405 when it was apparent that the point had been passed where the squadron could have expected to intercept the escaped ships. Course was then changed toward Treasury Islands, speed 31½ knots, the maximum possible considering the *Spence*'s boiler trouble. The night fighter reported at 0450 that he was going to drop a flare over a light that he saw on the port quarter of the formation. After completing his investigation, he reported an exploding ship smoking badly, at a position 30 miles or more to the north. This, it was concluded, was one of the damaged targets that had escaped to the west. No definite answer was received to the question the *Claxton* asked of the night fighter: whether it was worthwhile to go back and sink the target or would it sink anyway. Capt. Burke decided, however, that the risk of returning 30 miles north beyond reasonable range of fighter cover was too great, especially since the ship was exploding and might sink without assistance.

Although it was fully expected that enemy planes would seek revenge for the night's disaster, no Japanese aircraft appeared on the return voyage. The air cover which arrived at 0648 was welcome, though it proved unnecessary. The squadron completed its homeward trip without further incident, arriving at Purvis Bay about 2100 that night. During the day, search and patrol plans had sighted survivors of the battle. One plane reported sighting about 150 Japanese in the water 58 miles, bearing 295° from Buka Island. At 1645 another reported about the same number of survivors in the water at about latitude 04° 45' E., longitude 154° 05' E. He also observed an oil slick and debris-covered area of several square miles. The two groups of survivors were thoroughly strafed by our planes.

## SUBSEQUENT NAVAL OPERATIONS OF 1943

The Battle of Cape St. George proved to be the last surface engagement of the long series of battles which began with the disaster of Savo Island on 19 October 1942 at the outset of the Solomon Islands campaign. Naval activity during the remainder of 1943 was confined to minor surface bombardments and the forwarding of supplies and reinforcements to Cape Torokina. Our supply echelons were subjected to fewer air attacks during this period and they, along with their destroyer screens and covering forces, escaped without losses and with only minor damage.

At 0325 on 29 November, the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion landed between the Reini and Saua Rivers, about six miles east of Cape Torokina in 27 LCVP's and LCM's covered by two LCI gunboats and one MTB. When these forces were attacked later in the day by a greatly superior enemy group with heavy artillery and it became evidenced that they would have to be withdrawn, the support of a destroyer was requested. The landing craft with their gunboats were twice driven off in attempts to land and evacuate troops. With the help of the destroyer *Fullam* and four Corsairs, which silenced the enemy's fire, the forces were evacuated shortly after 2100.

To confuse and harass the enemy our surface forces carried out eight bombardments before the end of the year. The majority of these were conducted by small units of one or two destroyers. The Magine Islands off the coast of western Bougainville were bombarded on 23 November by two destroyers and again on the 28th by one. On 4 December two destroyers fired on gun positions and defenses on the southern coast of Empress Augusta Bay between the Jaba River and Motupena Point, and four days later one destroyer fired on the same area. In order to encourage a known Japanese belief that we intended to land at Buka on the morning of 25 December, that area was bombarded on the night of 23-24th by Admiral Merrill's force. It consisted of the *Montpelier* (F), *Cleveland*, and *Columbia* with the *Ausburne*, *Dyson*, *Stanly*, and *Claxton*. The bombardment was short and the results not spectacular. Other diversions were made by two bombardments of the eastern coast of Bougainville to increase enemy suspicions of a new landing on that side of the island. On the 20th the *Ausburne* and *Dyson* bombarded Tinput Harbor, Ruri Bay, and Tsundawan on the northern coast, and on the 27th Rear Admiral Walden L. Ainsworth, in the Honolulu, with the *St. Louis*, *Buchanan*, *Farenholt*, *Lansdowne*, and *Lardner*, fired on the Kieta and Numa Numa areas for an hour and a half. There was no enemy opposition and results were unobserved. During December three bombardments by light forces were aimed at breaking up enemy evacuation from Choiseul across to Toreau Bay, Bougainville. In none of these eight bombardments did our ships sustain any damage or their personnel any casualties. Results for the most part were unknown.

## CONCLUSION

The Navy's part in the Solomons Campaign diminished as fighting became more and more a matter of ground and air force. On 13 November command of the Bougainville position passed from Rear Admiral Wilkinson to Maj. Gen. Roy S. Geiger, Commanding General I Marine Amphibious Corps, although Admiral Wilkinson's task force continued to furnish naval and logistics support. On 15 December, the Commanding General XIV Corps, USA, relieved General Geiger in command of the forces at Empress Augusta Bay, and on Christmas day the withdrawal of the Marine troops began.

In December, activities of the South Pacific Force in northern Solomon Islands fell under the broad strategic direction of the Supreme Commander, Allied Forces, Southwest Pacific. The principal efforts of the South Pacific force were now toward the development of bases at Cape Torokina and Treasury Island from which not only enemy forces on Bougainville could be kept neutralized but from which attacks on the Bismarck area could be mounted. Thus, the final phases of the Solomon Islands Campaign merged with and soon became subordinated to the campaign to neutralize the Bismarck Archipelago.



## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

### Aircraft, American and Japanese

#### *Squadron Types*

VB	Bombing
VF	Fighting
VT	Torpedo

#### *American*

Black Cat	PBY "Catalina"; twin-engine amphibian Navy patrol-bomber (VPB), manufactured by Consolidated-Vultee
B-24	"Liberator"; four-engine bomber, manufactured by Consolidated-Vultee
B-25	"Mitchell"; twin-engine bomber, manufactured by North American
F6F	"Hellcat"; single-engine Navy fighter (VF), manufactured by Grumman
PV-1	"Ventura"; twin-engine, land-based Navy patrol-bomber(VPB[HL]), manufactured by Vega
SBD	'Dauntless"; single-engine Navy scout-bomber (VSB), manufactured by Douglas
TBF	"Avenger"; single-engine Navy torpedo-bomber (VTB), manufactured by Grumman

#### *Japanese*

Betty	Mitsubishi G4M; twin-engine bomber
Hap	Mitsubishi A6M3; single-engine carrier fighter
Kate	Nakajima B5N; single-engine carrier bomber
Nell	Mitsubishi G3M; twin-engine bomber
Tony	Kawasaki Ki-61; single engine fighter
Val	Aichi D3A; single-engine carrier dive-bomber
Zeke/Zero	Mitsubishi A6M; single-engine carrier fighter

### Vessels

AK	Cargo Vessel
APD	Transport (High-Speed)
CA	Heavy Cruiser
CL	Light Cruiser
CV	Aircraft Carrier
CVL	Light Aircraft Carrier
DD	Destroyer
DL	Destroyer Leader
LCI	Landing Craft, Infantry

LCI(L)	Landing Craft, Infantry, Large
LCM	Landing Craft, Mechanized
LCT	Landing Craft, Tank
LCVP	Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel
LST	Landing Ship, Tank
MTB	Motor Torpedo Boat
PT	Patrol Vessel, Motor Torpedo Boat

### Acronyms

CAP	Combat Air Patrol
CIC	Combat Information Center
(F)	Flagship
(FF)	Force Flagship
GP	General Purpose
IFF	Identification Friendly/Foe
PPI Scopes	Plan Position Indicator (Radar Scope)
SG Radar	Surface Search Radar
SK Radar	Air Search Radar (Shipborne)
SM Radar	Air and Surface Search Rader
TBS	Talk Between Ships
VHF	Very High Frequency

### Commands and Organizations

CinCPac	Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet
ComAirSols	Commander, Aircraft, Solomons
ComAirSoPac	Commander, Aircraft, South Pacific
ComCruDiv	Commander, Cruiser Division
ComDesDiv	Commander, Destroyer Division
ComDesRon	Commander, Destroyer Squadron
ComSoPac	Commander, South Pacific
ComSoWesPac	Commander, Southwest Pacific Command
ComTaskFor	Commander, Task Force
CruDiv	Cruiser Division
DesDiv	Destroyer Division
DesRon	Destroyer Squadron
SoWesPac	Southwest Pacific Command

## PHOTO SECTION



*U.S. aerial raid on Rabaul. Pictures taken by a plane from the USS Saratoga (CV 3) showing ships in harbor maneuvering under attack. Alt. var. F.L. 10", time 1120. Raid made by Air Group 12 (USS Saratoga) and Air Group 23 (USS Princeton—CVL 23) (Bu Aer 89105, 5 November 1943).*



*U.S. aerial raid on Rabaul. Pictures taken by a plane from the USS Saratoga (CV 3) showing ships in harbor maneuvering under attack. Alt. var. F.L. 10", time 1120. Raid made by Air Group 12 (USS Saratoga) and Air Group 23 (USS Princeton—CVL23) (Bu Aer 89105, 5 November 1943).*



*U.S. aerial raid on Rabaul, New Britain by Air Group 12 USS Saratoga (CV 3) and Air Group 23, USS Princeton (CVL 23). Alt. var.; F.L. 10", time 1120 (Bu Aer 204662, 5 November 1943).*



*This hole cost a man's life: The gunner in this Navy bomber was killed by a 20 mm. shell from a Japanese Zero during the U.S. Navy task force raid on Rabaul on 5 November 1943. Upon the plane's return to the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga, the dead gunner's finger was still clasped on the trigger of his .50 caliber machine gun. The Saratoga also participated in the second Navy raid on Rabaul on 11 November 1943 and saw action in the bloody taking of Tarawa (W-SAC-PA-5-44094-TR-7181, 16 December 1943).*



*Japanese air attack on the USS Essex and task force during raid on Rabaul, New Britain (Bu Aer 206610, 11 November 1943).*



*Landing operations at Bougainville in the Solomon Islands. A pair of barrage balloons float lazily in the air over several LST's unloading supplies for American forces that have been pushing the Japanese back into the jungle. The balloons protect the landing craft from low-level attacks by Japanese planes. Far in the distance, the smoking crater of Bagana, an active volcano, can be seen (Bu Aer 201995, 22 November 1943).*



*Japanese air attack on the USS Essex and task force during raid on Rabaul, New Britain. A pillar of smoke marks the watery grave of a Japanese Zero, shot down along with 68 other enemy planes (Bu Aer 206616, 11 November 1943).*



*Japanese air attack on the USS Essex and task force during raid on Rabaul, New Britain. A withering blanket of anti-aircraft fire meets the Japanese planes (11 November 1943).*



*U.S aerial raid on Rabaul. Pictures taken by a plane from the USS Saratoga (CV 3) showing ships in harbor maneuvering under attack. Alt. car. F.L. 10", time 1120. Air Group 12 (USS Saratoga) and Air Group 23 (USS Princeton—CVL 23) (Bu Aer 89096, 5 November 1943).*



*Putting men and supplies ashore at Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville Island, to reinforce beachhead established 1 November 1943 by the Marines. General view of beach (Bu Aer 202486, 6 November 1943).*



*Japanese men-of-war and merchant ships are here peacefully anchored on 5 November in the harbor at Rabaul, New Britain. In a few minutes, this became a scene of confusion and destruction as planes launched from Pacific Fleet carriers drove home one of the most damaging aerial blows of the war. Torpedoes, strafing, and dive-bombing attacks severely damaged ten Japanese warships; many were strafed by Navy Hellcats (Bu Aer 89967, 25 November 1943).*



*Destroyer going in: A trim American destroyer cuts across the bow of an American Marine-filled transport as the invaders strike Bougainville Island. The destroyers would go in close to shell the shore of Empress Augusta Bay before the Marines land. This is D-day of the landing (Headquarters No. 67,316, U.S. Marine Corps).*



(BuAer 55757)



*Night bombardment of the Buka airfield, Buka Island, Solomon Islands, by a U.S. task force, Taken aboard the USS Columbia (CL 56) (BuAer 203223, 1 November 1943).*



(BuAer 55767)



*Star shells illuminating the night during the surface battle off the west coast of Bougainville, Solomon Islands. As seen from the USS Columbia (CL 56) (BuAer 203232, 2 November 1943).*



*Marine Raiders, their landing craft can be seen in the water, invading small Torokina Island, just off the shore of Bougainville, Solomon Islands (Headquarters. No. 67,835, U.S. Marine Corps).*



*From a "PT": This scene is from one of our PT boats. In the foreground is an aerial gunner, and transports and landing craft, loaded with Marines and supplies, are in the background at Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville Island (Headquarters No. 65,267, U.S. Marine Corps).*





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