CHAPTER 5
GUADALCANAL—PACIFIC HINGE-PIN

WHILE events moved towards a clash at the southern end of the key island chain, similar moves at the northern end—in the Bismarck Archipelago and New Guinea—laid the future's foundations there. The Japanese stronghold at Rabaul, with the subsidiary bases at Lae, Salamaua, Gasmata, Kavieng, Finschhafen, Buka, Faisi, Lorengau and Kieta, were a constant and growing threat to Allied communications and to Australia's northern defences. At this period Rabaul, headquarters of 8th Base Force, which was responsible for the defence of the area, was the only major Japanese command of land-based air forces maintaining heavy and continuous air action against the enemy. Here the 25th Air Flotilla, under the command of Rear-Admiral Yamada, concentrated its full strength against Port Moresby in frequent attacks, usually with heavy formations of 27 or more bombers escorted by an equal number of Zero fighters.\(^1\)

The expansion of existing Allied aerodrome facilities was considered the best method of countering this threat. To an extent the Japanese were at a disadvantage in that Truk, their nearest base to Rabaul, was sea-separated from them by some 700 miles, and their home bases were more than three times that distance away. All supplies and reinforcements, including fighter aircraft, were of necessity seaborne, and replacements took from two to three weeks. Australia could reinforce New Guinea more rapidly, and her seaborne communications (Townsville to Milne Bay or Moresby approximately 600 miles) could be under good air protection after the provision of suitable airfields.

This provision was now being made. In a report to the American Chiefs of Staff on 2nd August 1942, General MacArthur told how airfields had been established "progressively northward along the north-east coast of Australia". The report continued:

First step was to develop the Townsville-Cloncurry area: engineers and protective garrisons, and finally Air Force units were moved into that area and Moresby used as an advanced stopping off aerodrome; the second step was then instituted by strengthening Port Moresby garrison to two Australian infantry brigades and miscellaneous units, moving in engineers and AA units to build and protect aerodromes and dispersal facilities, developing fields further northward along the Australian mainland through York Peninsula and movement forward thereto of protection garrisons and air elements; this step was largely completed early in June although some of the movement of engineers into undeveloped areas of the York Peninsula and the construction of airfields was incomplete, but rapidly progressing.

The third step was to be the establishment of more aerodromes in New Guinea, including one at Merauke to the west, 180 miles north-west of

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\(^1\) For instance on 5th July Moresby had its 68th raid, when 20 bombers attacked Seven Mile aerodrome at 10.12 a.m. and 14 minutes later another seven bombers attacked the same aerodrome.
Cape York, and one in the vicinity of Abau, on the south coast of New Guinea some 400 miles due east of Cape York. The Abau site, however, was found to be unsuitable, and MacArthur authorised instead the construction of an aerodrome at Milne Bay.

Milne Bay, a deep-water indentation running almost due west some 20 miles into the extreme south-east point of New Guinea, lies approximately 200 miles E.S.E. of Port Moresby. The bay’s southern shore is formed by the Cloudy Mountains Peninsula, the heights of which fall steeply from some 3,000 feet to a narrow coastal plain broadening towards the head of the bay, which here forms the eastern, coral-fringed shore of the relatively low isthmus separating Cloudy Mountains Peninsula from the remainder of Papua. On its north shore Milne Bay is bounded by a long, tapering peninsula whose high spine is the Stirling Range, the knife-edge ridges of which gradually fall from some 4,000 feet in the west to its terminus at East Cape, New Guinea’s eastern extremity on Goschen Strait. There is little coral along the northern shore of the bay, which in its western half is fringed by muddy beaches, broken occasionally by wooded rises, and backed by a narrow coastal strip between the shore and the mountains. Varying between a quarter mile and a mile in width, this strip consists mainly of thick jungle and sago swamps, interspersed with occasional coconut plantations. In the eastern half of the north shore, the beaches are sandy. About seven miles wide at its entrance, Milne Bay has a greatest width of about 10 miles half way along its length.

By sea from Australia or Port Moresby, the approach to Milne Bay is through the lovely China Strait, separating Papua’s second port—the small island of Samarai—from the mainland. At this stage of the war in 1942 Milne Bay occupied a key strategic position as the staging point for the Allied advance along the north coast of New Guinea. In relation to Port Moresby it was in a position analogous to that in the Mediterranean of Mersa Matruh in relation to Alexandria and the Libyan coast. Its immediate weaknesses were the torrential rains of the wet season just beginning, malaria, and complete lack of shipping berths and cargo-handling facilities.

The construction of an airfield at Milne Bay was authorised by G.H.Q. on 12th June. That afternoon H.M.A.S. Warrego, which had sailed at daybreak escorting the Dutch ship Karsik to Townsville, was recalled with her charge to Port Moresby to form part of the first convoy to Milne Bay. Warrego’s commanding officer, Lieut-Commander A. H. Green, R.A.N., had previous experience of the type of operations now in train when he was Naval Liaison Officer at General O’Connor’s headquarters in the Western Desert in 1940-41. On 18th June, Commander R. B. A. Hunt, the N.O.I.C. Port Moresby, went with Brigadier-General Martin F. Scanlon, Commander of the Allied Air Forces, New Guinea, to Milne Bay to investigate the proposed aerodrome site. On Hunt’s instructions a sketch survey of the area had been prepared by Sub-Lieutenant I. F. Champion, R.A.N.V.R., commanding officer of Laurabada, and in consultation with him Hunt decided that it would be practicable to place a vessel of Karsik’s
type alongside near Gili Gili, at the north-west head of the bay, provided that two earth ramps and floating pontoons could be built at short notice. This work was at once undertaken by Captain Rich of Angau. Hunt returned to Port Moresby to find that during his absence the Burns Philip ship Macdhui, damaged in an air raid on the harbour the previous day, had again been the target for Japanese bombers in Moresby's 62nd air raid on the 18th and (as stated earlier in this volume) became a total loss.

The first convoy to Milne Bay, consisting of Karsik loaded with supplies and equipment, and another Dutch ship, Bontekoe, carrying about 800 troops, including Australian troops and American engineers, escorted by Warrego (with Champion on board as pilot), and Ballarat (Lieut-Commander A. D. Barling), sailed from Moresby on 24th June and reached Milne Bay at noon next day. Bontekoe disembarked her troops into local schooners, and sailed with Ballarat as escort at dawn on the 26th. Karsik berthed alongside at Gili Gili to discharge her cargo, with Warrego, disguised and camouflaged with shrubs and branches, lying near by. Captain Rich had done his part with an improvised wharf, and Green, in Warrego, found Karsik's discharging "proceeding satisfactorily. Locally constructed petrol drum pontoon in use, greatly facilitated unloading. A.I.F. working extremely well; 250 native boys, recruited by District Officer, Samarai, working exceptionally well. (Payment, one stick of trade tobacco, and one lb of rice per diem.) Karsik completed discharging at 8.30 a.m. on 28th June, and the two ships sailed for Australia.

While these events were taking place at the northern end of the island line, Admiral King took initiating action with regard to the southern. In a memorandum to General Marshall on 25th June he proposed mounting an offensive in the South Pacific about 1st August, using the 1st Marine Division, then on its way from the United States to New Zealand. Such an amphibious operation to retake Tulagi had been suggested by Admiral Nimitz, to be covered by two carrier task forces he had ready at Pearl Harbour. Marshall liked the idea, but suggested that the operation be entrusted to MacArthur, to which King replied, on 26th June, that it could not be conducted in any other way than under the direction of Commander-in-Chief, Pacific. "One can readily understand why," commented the American naval historian. "The only amphibiously trained troops available were Marines; the only troop lift available was Navy transports; the only covering and supporting force (other than Ghormley's tiny force) was the Pacific Fleet. And the only assistance that MacArthur could render would be land-based air cover from distant Australian fields." King suggested that MacArthur could come in after the amphibious phase,
and with Pacific Fleet support take charge of troop movement into the southern Solomons, and consolidation of the area. Marshall agreed, and a Joint Chiefs of Staff directive, which with some modifications governed Allied movements in the South Pacific for the next eighteen months, was produced, dated 2nd July. Summarised, this directive was:

(i) **Ultimate Objectives:** Seizure and occupation of the New Britain-New Ireland-New Guinea area.

(ii) **Tasks:**

1. Operation **WATCHTOWER**. Seize and occupy the Santa Cruz Islands, Tulagi and adjacent positions. Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, to be in charge. Target date 1st August 1942.
2. Seize and occupy the rest of the Solomon Islands, Lae, Salamaua, and Papua. MacArthur to be in overall command.

(iii) **Other important clauses:**

Direct command of tactical operations to remain with the naval task force commander throughout all three tasks; the Joint Chiefs of Staff to retain the right to withdraw naval attached units after the completion of any one task for use elsewhere, if in their judgement desirable; the boundary between S.W.P.A. (MacArthur) and the Pacific Area (Nimitz) to be shifted westward to the longitude 159 degrees East from 1st August 1942, to include Guadalcanal in the Pacific Area.

In the event, some of the tasks listed above were never carried out as then intended. Circumstances enabled the ultimate objective—the winning of the war—to be achieved without the cost in human life and the materials of war that invasion of all the designated areas would have entailed. But the operation for the seizure of Tulagi, and of Guadalcanal and the potential Japanese airstrip, was carried out, though neither General MacArthur nor Admiral Ghormley (who met in Melbourne early in July to discuss the impending operation) liked either it or the proposed target date of 1st August. In a protest to King and Nimitz on 8th-9th July, they urged that **WATCHTOWER** be deferred until adequate means were available for a quick seizure and rapid follow-up, in view of the recently developed enemy airfields, and the shortage of Allied aircraft, airfields, transports, and troops.

These protests caused King, in a letter to Marshall on 10th July, to observe:

Three weeks ago MacArthur stated that, if he could be furnished amphibious forces and two carriers, he could push right through to Rabaul. . . . He now feels that he not only cannot undertake this extended operation but not even the Tulagi operation.

That same day King wrote to MacArthur saying that **WATCHTOWER** must not be delayed, even if the follow up were postponed. A Japanese airfield on Guadalcanal would be too serious a threat to the United States-Australia communications. In accepting the responsibility for ordering **WATCHTOWER**
at this juncture, said the U.S. naval historian, Admiral King “made one of the great decisions of the war”. Preparations for the operation were put in hand at once.

III

Meanwhile, with the arrival of the Allied troops and engineers at Milne Bay, work began at once on the site clearing and construction of an airstrip (to be Milne Bay’s No. 1 Strip) some three miles west of the improvised docks. When, on 11th July, Brigadier Field arrived in Milne Bay to command “Milne Force”, with advanced elements of his 7th Brigade Group in the Dutch ship *Tasman* (4,492 tons) escorted by *Warrego*, the construction of No. 1 Strip was well advanced. Within a few days of his arrival a site for a second strip (No. 2) was decided on at Waigani, some eight miles due west of the docks. By the end of the month Field had planned a third (No. 3) strip, a mile north-eastward of the dock and running north-westward from the water’s edge on the west side of Swinger Bay. By early August, when work on No. 3 Strip was started, the Allied forces at Milne Bay comprised 8,600 Australian combat troops, supported by two R.A.A.F. Kittyhawk fighter squadrons, with 1,300 American troops, mainly engineers constructing the airstrip.

In this race for strategically placed airfields, the Allies were at this stage ahead of the Japanese at the southern end of the island chain. The enemy occupied the Lunga area of Guadalcanal with a contingent from the Tulagi garrison on 8th June. A survey group selected a site for an airstrip two miles south-east of Lunga Point. Work on its construction began in mid-July by 2,571 men of the 11th and 13th Construction Units. A force of about 400 men of the 81st and 84th Garrison Units was organised to defend the area. Simultaneously men of the 14th Construction Unit were at work improving an emergency airstrip, adequate for medium bombers, at Buka. The opinion of the staff officers of the 8th Base Force at Rabaul was that when the bases at Buka and Guadalcanal were finished, the air defence of the Solomons would be complete.

But though the enemy lagged behind in their development of Guadalcanal as against the Allies at Milne Bay, they stole a march westward of Milne Bay. On 15th July General MacArthur issued a directive to Brigadier-General Robert H. Van Volkenburgh, U.S. Army, commander designate of “Buna Force”, to prepare and defend an aerodrome in the Buna area, 175 miles north-west of New Guinea’s eastern tip at East Cape, and 85 miles north-east of Port Moresby, from which it lies diametrically across the land with its lofty spinal barrier of the Owen Stanley mountain range. The plan allowed for the seizure of the area by a light force crossing overland from Moresby, and the transport of advanced parties to the main force—and later of the main force itself—by sea. Protection along the north-east coast of New Guinea would be provided by Milne

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6 Morison, Vol IV, pp. 259-63, whence much of the above account is derived.
6 Brig J. Field, CBE, DSO, ED. Comd 2/12 Bn 1939-42, 7 Bde 1942-45. University lecturer and mechanical engineer; of Hobart; b. Castlemaine, Vic, 10 Apr 1899.
Bay. The essence of the plan was to take possession of the area, provide immediate anti-aircraft defences, and unload supplies prior to discovery.

Unfortunately the Japanese had similar ideas regarding Buna. They were aware of the Allied activities at Milne Bay, where they carried out their first air reconnaissance on 11th July. But their immediate interest was in Buna, thence to carry out the invasion of Port Moresby by an overland operation, supplemented by another advance by sea.

Moves in Solomons-New Guinea area, June-August 1942

It will be recalled that, subsequent to the check to Japanese plans by the Coral Sea Battle, General Hyakutake, commander of the XVII Army, was directed on 18th May to attack New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa, and to continue the attack on Port Moresby by land across New Guinea. Naval losses at Midway deprived the Japanese of the naval-air strength to carry out the New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa part of this plan, but the Port Moresby part remained. Another part of the plan remained in the form of the Eighth Fleet, which was originally intended as a local defence force for Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia after their occupation. Under the new arrangement the interests and activities of the XVII Army were to be concentrated on the invasion of Port Moresby. A central army-navy agreement placed responsibility for the defence of the Solomons upon the Eighth Fleet.

The Japanese invasion in the Gona-Buna area took place on 21st-22nd July. The invasion force in three transports, escorted by the 18th Cruiser Squadron (Tatsuta, Tenryu), destroyers and submarine chasers, left Rabaul
on 20th July. At 5.30 p.m. on the 21st, naval landing forces went on shore at Giruwa, three miles north-west of Buna, and at 7 p.m. army forces began landing at Basabua, five miles farther west. Naval forces occupied Buna, without opposition, on the 22nd. That day an Allied air attack on Japanese ships in the Buna anchorage damaged the transport Ayatosan Maru (9,788 tons) and destroyer Uzuki, and both ships returned to Rabaul escorted by the destroyer Yuzuki. The remainder of the invasion force—the cruisers, minelayer Tsugaru, transport Ryoyo Maru (5,974 tons), destroyer Asanagi, and the submarine chasers, left Buna and reached Rabaul on 24th July. There were follow-up landings at Buna on 26th July by small army reinforcements in the destroyer Yunagi, and on the 29th-30th by a larger army force in transports Ryoyo Maru and Kotoku Maru (6,701 tons), escorted by Tatsuta and Yuzuki. In Allied air attacks on 29th-30th July, Kotoku Maru was hit and had to be abandoned.

On 30th July Vice-Admiral Mikawa arrived at Rabaul, and hoisted his flag on shore in a ramshackle building “far inferior to those of the lesser headquarters of the 8th Base Force”. Mikawa, described by one of his staff officers as “a gentle, soft-spoken man and an intelligent naval officer of broad experience, judgment and courage”, in his own words “recognised the mobile capability of U.S. carrier task forces”, and accordingly decided to station Chokai and the 6th Cruiser Division in the safer rear base of Kavieng, while he himself commanded local operations from on shore at Rabaul. His own capabilities were circumscribed in that his command extended only to sea and land operations in the area. Air operations were entirely outside his responsibility and control. In discussions with XVII Army it was decided that a coastal route to Port Moresby must be opened as soon as possible, since it would be impossible to maintain the necessary flow of supplies and heavy weapons, over the Owen Stanley range. Plans were accordingly made for the seaborne invasion of Port Moresby by mid-August, with the invasion of Milne Bay as a preliminary operation.

IV

Simultaneously, away in the south, the Allies were hastening preparations for the invasion of Tulagi and Guadalcanal. On 10th July Vice-Admiral Ghormley received Admiral Nimitz’s operational orders for the seizure of Tulagi, Guadalcanal, and Ndeni in the Santa Cruz group, about 250 miles north of Espiritu Santo. (In the event the Santa Cruz Islands were never occupied in strength “because they proved to be forbiddingly malarial and rugged”.) With the operation order, Ghormley received a list of available ground and air forces and ships. They included assault forces of some 16,000 American marines; about 670 aircraft of all types; 48 combat ships;
and 28 auxiliaries. American, Australian, and New Zealand forces were among them in one form or another. Of the aircraft, 240 were carrier-based in the air groups of U.S. Ships Saratoga, Enterprise, and Wasp; around 300 of Vice-Admiral J. S. McCain’s South Pacific Force were land-based, variously distributed at Efate, New Caledonia, Fiji, Tongatapu, and Samoa; the balance were land-based aircraft of MacArthur’s South-West Pacific Force, operating under the command of General George C. Kenney, U.S.A., and his area commanders Air Commodore F. W. F. Lukis, R.A.A.F., and Brigadier-General Scanlon, U.S.A., and based in north-east Australia and Port Moresby. The ships designated for the operation were the carriers Saratoga, Enterprise, and Wasp of the Air Support Force with its covering groups comprising the new battleship North Carolina, and the heavy cruisers Minneapolis, New Orleans, Portland, San Francisco and Salt Lake City, and the anti-aircraft light cruiser Atlanta, with 16 screening destroyers; the escort to the Amphibious Force, H.M.A. Ships Australia, Canberra, and Hobart, and U.S.S. Chicago, with nine screening destroyers; the Fire Support Groups, heavy cruisers Vincennes, Quincy, Astoria, and the anti-aircraft light cruiser San Juan, and six destroyers; and the Amphibious Force of 13 transports, six store ships, and four converted destroyer fast transports. There were also six American “S” class submarines from the force based on Brisbane under Captain R. W. Christie, U.S.N. These prowled off Rabaul, while another group from the Pacific Fleet kept watch on the Japanese base at Truk.

The over-all commander was Admiral Ghormley, in his flagship Argonne at Noumea. The officer in tactical command was Admiral Fletcher, in U.S.S. Saratoga. Rear-Admiral Richmond K. Turner, U.S.N., commanded the Amphibious Force and the embarked Marines. In practice, Fletcher limited his command to the three carrier groups, and Turner had complete autonomy from the moment of sailing. His second-in-command, and commander of Task Force 44 (which in this operation became Task Group 62.6, the escort to the Amphibious Force) and of the Fire Support Groups, was Rear-Admiral Crutchley, R.N., commanding the Australian Squadron, flying his flag in H.M.A.S. Australia. Major-General A. A. Vandegrift commanded the Marines on shore.

The expeditionary force was formed with the meeting of the various components from Noumea, New Zealand, Australia, and other Pacific departure points. The Wasp carrier group, for example, sailed from San Diego on 1st July escorting six combat-loaded transports carrying the third echelon of Marines. Time did not allow of tactical exercises to any extent. It was America’s first amphibious operation since 1898. Few of the ships had ever operated together before. Crutchley did not even have

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1 There were at this time 11 US submarines based on Brisbane, and 19 (under Rear-Admiral C. A. Lockwood, USN), based on Fremantle, WA. On 1st August 5 and 11 submarines respectively were on patrol.
2 Argonne, US fleet auxiliary (conv. 1940), 8,400 tons.
the chance to meet the captains of the U.S. cruisers hurriedly placed under his command. There was no time for operation orders to be prepared, distributed and studied, before the ships taking part had sailed to carry out the landing rehearsal and the actual operation. In all of these important factors the expedition was at a decided disadvantage.

There were various preliminaries. Early in June it was apparent to the D.N.I., Long, in Melbourne, that the American build-up in the South Pacific presaged offensive operations there. Lieut-Commander H. A. Mackenzie, who had been Naval Intelligence Officer at Rabaul, was appointed Deputy Supervising Intelligence Officer at Noumea, there to receive, interpret, and disseminate to South Pacific headquarters information about the islands, and Intelligence received from the coastwatchers there. The coastwatchers' Intelligence contributed—with information and photographs from air force sources—towards the maps of Lunga, Tulagi, and Gavutu, giving the positions of Japanese guns, defence works, and other installations, together with information including the approximate numbers of enemy troops at each, which Australian Naval Intelligence at Townsville, under Commander Feldt's direction as Supervising Intelligence Officer; North Eastern Area, was able to supply to the American Marines before the operation. The coastwatchers included a number strategically placed behind the Japanese lines in the Solomons—Lieutenant Read, R.A.N.V.R., in northern Bougainville; Lieutenant Mason, R.A.N.V.R., in the south of that island; Lieutenant Macfarlan on Guadalcanal, where at the west end was also Sub-Lieutenant Rhoades and at the east end District Officer Martin Clemens, among others. Another District Officer, Kennedy, was on Ysabel Island, north of Guadalcanal. Some of these, Read and Mason in particular, were nourished by means of "drops" from Allied aircraft at intervals. Earlier in the year, the civil administration in the British Solomons was turned into a military administration. All civil servants were commissioned into the British Solomon Islands Protectorate Defence Force—the District Officers as captains—under the command of the Resident Commissioner, Marchant with the rank of lieut-colonel and with his headquarters on Malaita.

The interest of the Japanese in Guadalcanal was reported by the coastwatchers from June onwards, and their observations were confirmed by aerial reconnaissance. Meanwhile the Japanese were aware of the presence of these enemies in their midst and made sporadic attempts to capture them, and even took dogs to Bougainville as an aid—five warships arrived off Kieta on 3rd July, and an occupation force, with dogs, landed. But

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8 Lt P. E. Mason, DSC, RANVR. Coastwatcher, AIB. Plantation manager; of Bougainville; b. Sydney, 30 Apr 1901.
9 Lt-Cdr F. A. Rhoades, RANVR. (1st AIF: Tpr 1st LH Regt.) Coastwatcher, AIB. Plantation manager; of Guadalcanal; b. North Sydney, 26 Jun 1895.
the general loyalty of the natives, and the skill, care, and courage of the coastwatchers, defeated these attempts, though there were some close shaves.7

Because of the limit of teleradio range attainable by the amateur coastwatcher operators, routine communication in the Solomons was from them to Marchant on Malaita. He had a professional operator who was able to transmit to and receive signals from the 700 miles distant Vila, Efate. Marchant re-coded the coastwatchers’ messages in high grade code, and sent them to the Naval Intelligence Officer at Vila, whence they were re-transmitted to the South Pacific command. When transmission to Vila was difficult, Vanikoro Island, 300 miles from Malaita in the Santa Cruz group, provided the link with a radio there operated by Mrs Ruby Boye, wife of the manager of a timber company.8

On 9th July Marchant passed on the information that the Japanese were consolidating on Guadalcanal and were clearing a coconut grove to construct an airfield. Macfarlan was instructed to conduct a ground reconnaissance of the position there. He went through the mountains at the back of Lunga and reached a point about a mile from the control room in the centre of the airfield, whence he had a good view of the proceedings, watched the evening parade, and under cover of darkness made back for his camp. On the way he slipped and broke a bone in his right ankle, and had to be carried for several miles by his natives. He reached the camp safely and teleradioed his information. On Malaita, Marchant was instructed to send weather reports daily, and these assisted in making a forecast some days ahead of D-day. On Bougainville, to make certain that they were available when the Allied assault took place, Read and Mason were instructed to move inland clear of any danger, and to preserve radio silence until instructed to resume reporting. Not until 5th August were they directed to resume their lookout positions—Read at Pora Pora, overlooking Buka Passage, and Mason on Malabita Hill above Buin, whence he had an unrivalled view of the whole area enclosed by the Shortland Islands, Fauro Island, and Bougainville. From the two observation posts their occupants would visually cover the air routes from Kavieng to Guadalcanal, and from Rabaul to Guadalcanal, and be able to pass good notice of any south-bound attacking aircraft. They would, too, have under observation the likely anchorages of any surface forces used in a Japanese counter-attack.

7 Macfarlan, on Guadalcanal, later reported: “During the period that my camp was established at Gold Ridge, which was almost continuous from the middle of March until the 9th July . . . only two real attempts were made by the enemy to capture us, despite the fact that they were quite well aware of my position, who I was, and of the fact that I was operating an observation post with teleradio communication. Invariably patrols would proceed along the Balasuna River until the going got hard, that is, through thick scrub and scrubby steep rises in the mountains with occasional descents into gorges and up again on the other side. In view of their reluctance to negotiate this type of country, I concluded that they were either physically incapable of doing so, or they were afraid of ambush by the bush natives.” Macfarlan eventually decided to shift from Gold Ridge to another lookout post after his eyrie there was machine-gunned by two Zero float-planes on 9th July. (Report of Paymaster Lieutenant D. S. Macfarlan, RANVR 1942.)

8 She was later appointed Honorary Third Officer WRANS, and was awarded the British Empire Medal.
To ensure the prompt receipt of any warning messages transmitted by them, Read and Mason were instructed to pass aircraft reports in plain language, and the American command was told the frequency on which these reports would be made. And, to make certain that transmission channels would exist, in addition to direct signals from Read and Mason to the American forces, it was arranged that Marchant would pass the messages from Malaita to Vila whence they would be relayed on by the Naval Intelligence Officer there; and an alternative channel through Port Moresby, Townsville and Canberra, would pass the warnings to Pearl Harbour, whence a powerful transmitter would broadcast them to the Pacific.

On 7th July Task Force 44, which had been based on Brisbane for two months, received advice that it would be cooperating in certain offensive operations about 1st August. It had been strengthened by the addition of H.M.A.S. Canberra (which had been refitting in Sydney), U.S.S. Salt Lake City, and the American 4th Destroyer Squadron, U.S. Ships Selfridge, Henley, Mugford, Blue, Helm, Patterson, Ralph Talbot, Jarvis, and Bagley. During the period, radar was fitted in a number of ships, and—partly to conform with the American ships, but chiefly because experience at sea had shown that camouflage was of little use—the Australian ships were painted dark matt sea grey.

On 14th July Task Force 44, comprising Australia (Captain H. B. Farncomb, flag of Rear-Admiral Crutchley), Canberra (Captain F. E. Getting¹), Hobart (Captain H. A. Showers²), Salt Lake City, Chicago, and destroyers Patterson, Ralph Talbot, and Jarvis, left Brisbane to rendezvous with Admiral Turner’s Amphibious Force (comprising eight transports and four cargo ships, with escort) which it did at Wellington on the 19th. Other destroyers of the force which were not in Brisbane at the time of sailing joined at Wellington. On 22nd July the combined forces sailed from the New Zealand port, and on the 26th, about 300 miles south of Fiji, met Task Force 61 (Saratoga, Enterprise, Wasp, North Carolina, cruisers and destroyers, and five transports and the four fast destroyer transports). Salt Lake City detached from Task Force 44 to join Wasp’s covering group. The whole force, with the carrier groups providing distant cover, then proceeded to the vicinity of the Fiji Islands where, from 28th to 31st July inclusive, the amphibious and screening forces carried out landing rehearsals on Koro Island. Ships were fuelled, final operation orders were issued, and a conference of group commanders of the Allied Force was

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¹ Captain Getting, who succeeded Burnett as Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff in May 1941 when Burnett was appointed in command of Sydney, assumed command of Canberra vice Captain Moore, on 17th June 1942. He was succeeded as Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff by Captain R. F. Nichols, RN.

² Captain Showers assumed command of Hobart (from Adelaide) on 8th June 1942, vice Captain H. L. Howden.
held in Australia, where Rear-Admiral Turner and General Vandegrift outlined plans and landing schedules.

Rear-Admiral Crutchley was nominated commander of the screening group responsible for the safe arrival in the combat area of the troop and cargo ships, and for their support there against all forms of enemy attack. He was also nominated second-in-command of the Attack Force, in charge of the withdrawal of the troop and cargo ships from the combat area when they were emptied.

The amphibious force and screening force sailed from Koro Island at 5.30 p.m. on 31st July and, south of the Fiji Islands at 5 p.m. next day, met the three carrier groups, which provided reconnaissance and patrols during the voyage to the scene of operations. Noon position on Sunday, 2nd August, was some 250 miles east of the southernmost of the New Hebrides. Vice-Admiral Ghormley assumed operational command of the U.S. Army Forces in the South Pacific, and the dividing line between the South Pacific and South-West Pacific was moved one degree westward, to 159 degrees East. The expedition steamed north-westward up between the New Hebrides and Loyalty Islands. There was no indication that they had been sighted by enemy reconnaissance, though Intelligence that the Japanese were moving additional air strength towards Rabaul from the Mandates suggested that the enemy might be aware of the impending attack. From 4th August onwards Crutchley maintained radar guard for the detection of enemy reconnaissance aircraft.

At noon on 5th August, with less than two days to go, the ships were about 400 miles S. by W. of Guadalcanal. The weather was favouring the invaders, with much cumulus cloud and a surface haze which, on 6th August, as the expedition approached its objective, deepened into heavy overcast and a damp mist which closely limited surface visibility. At noon the assault groups were about 60 miles west of Rennell Island, which is 130 miles due south of Guadalcanal, and were steering north with the escorts at first degree of surface and anti-aircraft readiness. The carrier groups had proceeded to their own covering positions south of Guadalcanal.

At 4.15 p.m. on the 6th the assault forces assumed approach positions. Squadron “Y”, comprising the four ex-destroyer transports and four merchant transports which would make the landings in the Tulagi area, was in the van, led by U.S.S. San Juan with Chicago and H.M.A.S. Canberra as additional escorts, and six destroyers and five minesweepers. Six miles astern, Australia led the Guadalcanal landing force of Squadron “X”, of nine transports and six store ships, with H.M.A.S. Hobart and U.S. Ships Vincennes, Quincy, Astoria, and nine destroyers. At 10.30 p.m. Squadron “Y” altered course to N.E. towards the north-west end of Guadalcanal, with Squadron “X” following suit half an hour later. Through the darkness the two groups stole quietly over a smooth sea until the waning moon, rising just before 2.30 in the morning of Friday, 7th August, climbed to reveal a shadowy Savo Island and the western end of Guadalcanal. The groups’ ways parted. Squadron “Y” stood on north-eastward to pass to the
northward of Savo, and Squadron “X” hauled round to the south-eastward for the disembarkation area off Guadalcanal’s north shore. Except for the approaching ships the sea was empty and silent; and the dimly apprehended moon-bathed shores were unrevealing and unresponsive.

VI

Meanwhile, others of the strategical strings manipulated by the Allied naval commands and affecting naval forces in connection with this operation, were drawing ships eastward across the Indian Ocean. Towards the end of July, Admiral King asked the Admiralty for a diversion by the Eastern Fleet early in August to help the offensive in the Solomons. The result was operation STAB, carried out by Admiral Somerville in the Bay of Bengal. Force “A” of the Eastern Fleet, comprising Warspite, Illustrious, Formidable, cruisers, and destroyers including the Australian ships Napier (D.7), Norman and Nizam, reached Colombo at the end of July. Sufficient merchant ships were assembled to form three dummy convoys, and from 1st August these were sailed from Colombo and the east coast of India to simulate an expedition against the Andaman Islands.

Operation STAB was, seemingly, a substitute for a more ambitious project. On 3rd June General Blarney suggested to General MacArthur that two courses of action were open regarding Timor: the recapture of the island with an overseas expedition; or the withdrawal thence of the bulk of the Allied forces then engaged in guerilla warfare against the Japanese. MacArthur replied that a number of requisites for the formation of an adequate overseas expedition were lacking: “Without them such an expedition has little chance of success and cannot therefore be considered with the means now available.”

Apparently, however, the matter was canvassed elsewhere. MacArthur’s reply to Blarney was on 11th June. A few days later Admiral King in Washington signalled to Admiral Leary in Melbourne:

Agreement expected with British for minimum of two carriers from Eastern Fleet for seizure of Timor or other suitable place with provision that detachment be used conjointly with air land-based in north-west Australia. To be timed with this will be seizure of Tulagi by Sopac Forces, including U.S. Task Force of minimum of two carriers likewise to be used with air land-based in north-east Australia, New Hebrides and New Caledonia. Target date is 1st August.

Discussing operation STAB, and probably referring to the above-mentioned suggestion, the British naval historian says:

The Admiralty was anxious to help contain Japanese air and surface forces, but found it difficult to devise an effective way of doing so. They did not consider that hit-and-run raids on the Andaman Islands or on northern Sumatra would deceive the enemy, and they were determined not to run the risk of exposing a fleet, whose fighter defences were bound to be very thin, to attack by shore-based aircraft.3

There were indications that the Japanese moved bomber reinforcements to northern Sumatra about this time, and there were reports of Japanese

The motor vessel *Macdhui* on fire after air attack. Port Moresby, 18th June 1942.

H.M.A.S. *Warrego* at Port Moresby, September 1942.
Nursing sisters of the R.A.N.

(Australian War Memorial)

A group of W.R.A.N.S.

(R.A.N. Historical Section)
Rear-Admiral V. A. C. Crutchley, V.C., Rear-Admiral Commanding Australian Squadron.

First Officer S. M. McClemans, Director of W.R.A.N.S., November 1944.
American shipping on fire after a Japanese bombing attack, Guadalcanal, 8th August 1942.

A Japanese bombing attack at Guadalcanal, 8th August 1942.
surface movements in the Malay area; but it is doubtful if any substantial forces were transferred in the direction of the Indian Ocean. Force “A” returned to Colombo on 4th August, and on that day the 4th Cruiser Squadron, with part of Force “A”—Formidable, Nizam and Norman—sailed for Kilindini to prepare for operations against Madagascar. The remainder of Force “A”—Warspite and Illustrious, with five destroyers including Napier—sailed westward from Colombo on 10th August, but Admiral Somerville arranged for a radio diversion giving the impression that Force “A” was still operating in the Bay of Bengal until 18th August.4

(While the three Australian “N” Class destroyers of the 7th Flotilla were thus engaged in the eastern Indian Ocean, Nepal,5 another of the class, and the last to commission (29th May 1942) for the R.A.N., was on her way out from England to join the flotilla. On 3rd August Nepal (Commander Morris6) was in the Atlantic as part of the anti-submarine escort of one of the “Winston’s Special” convoys—21P. At 2 p.m., when on the equator in the Gulf of Guinea, she started a series of depth-charge attacks on a submarine. The hunt continued for an hour and a half, but without decisive result. She joined the Eastern Fleet in time to take part in the Madagascar operation in September.)

VII

Away some 500 miles north-westward in Rabaul, faint echoes were heard of happenings at the southern end of the island chain. Increasingly the distant rumbles of Allied bomb explosions on Guadalcanal were brought home to Japan’s Eighth Fleet in reports from the southern island’s garrison. On the last day of July seven American Flying Fortress bombers attacked Guadalcanal; ten struck on 1st August and eleven the next day; two on the 3rd, nine on the 4th, and five on 5th August. Increased radio communication between the Allies in the South Pacific was also apparent, and on 5th August Eighth Fleet received from Imperial General Headquarters the suggestion, based on a report from Radio Intelligence, that active enemy operations might be in train in the south seas. But Eighth Fleet thought otherwise, and, remembering the trans-montane raids from the American carriers in March when they struck at Lae and Salamaua, concluded that any enemy thrust would be in Papua against the Japanese bridgehead at Buna and the forces creeping south over the Owen Stanleys. It was considered that the increased air raids on Guadalcanal were diversionary.7

4 The Japanese did reinforce the Andaman area at the end of July. In conjunction with reinforcements by the army, the navy stationed the 8th Kure Special Naval Landing Force on Car Nicobar Island, one air defence unit and coast artillery unit at Port Blair, and one unit of coast artillery at Sabang. “Japanese Studies in World War II, No. 29. Naval Operations in the Southern Area, 1942-45.” An ATIS Document 851/1-29. AL1082.
5 HMAS Nepal, destroyer (1942), 1,690 tons, six 4.7-in guns, five 21-in torpedo tubes, 36 kts.
6 Capt F. B. Morris, OBE; RAN. Squadron (N) Officer, HMAS Canberra, 1939-41; Comd HMAS Nepal 1942-44, HMAS Ballarat and Senior Officer 21st MS Flotilla 1944-45; NOIC New Guinea 1945. B. Wykeprope, Vic, 22 May 1902.
7 Ohmae, “The Battle of Savo Island”, p. 1267.
Plans were pressed forward for the overland drive to Port Moresby, and for the invasion of Milne Bay. On 31st July a Buna convoy—minelayer *Tsugaru*, transport *Nankai Maru* (8,416 tons), and a submarine chaser—was attacked by Allied aircraft and denied entrance to Buna anchorage. On 4th August Milne Bay suffered its first air raid, when five Zero fighters carried out a gunfire attack on Gili Gili. The Japanese intended to run a big convoy to Buna, carrying the main body of the *Nankai Detachment*, to arrive there on 8th August. They believed that the Allies would make every effort to intercept, and as an insurance against this planned a heavy air raid on Milne Bay in the early morning of 7th August. The Buna convoy—*Nankai Maru*, *Kinai Maru* (8,360 tons) and *Kenyo Maru* (6,470), escorted by *Tatsuta*, *Yuzuki*, *Uzuki*, and submarine chasers sailed from Rabaul on 6th August. Japanese air searches to the south reported no enemy activity south of Guadalcanal, and the day passed quietly. But next dawn, before the projected air attack on Milne Bay could take place, came plan-changing news from the south in an urgent signal which led to the cancellation of the Milne Bay raid and the recall of the Buna convoy: “0430. Tulagi being heavily bombarded from air and sea. Enemy carrier task force sighted.” Successive messages indicated a serious turn. Rabaul lost contact with Japanese forces on Guadalcanal after a message saying that they had encountered American landing forces and were retreating into the jungle hills. Fateful news from the Tulagi garrison reached Rabaul at 6.5 a.m. “The enemy force is overwhelming. We will defend our positions to the death.” The day of destiny had dawned in the Pacific.

There was “hard lying” in the Australian cruisers of the Tulagi and Guadalcanal attack forces as they steamed towards their objectives through the night of 6th-7th August 1942. Ships’ companies slept on the decks, in the turrets and in the control positions, at their stations in first degree of readiness in the earlier stages of the night. In *Australia*, the bugle sang its call to “action stations” at 2.45 a.m. on the 7th.

The sailors rise stiffly from their rest and collect their odds and ends; steel helmets, *Mae Wests*. We eagerly suck up a mug of boiling cocoa, turning the bottoms up sky high to get the last sweet drop, and we can see the land now, black and menacing on our starboard bow. . . . It is amusing to hear the bridge personnel discussing events in a low whisper, presumably in order that the enemy shall not be aware of our presence. But he is still some twenty miles distant.

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8 “Mae Wests” were the life-jackets which gave the wearers something of a pouter pigeon appearance. They were so called after a voluptuously curved actress of the period.

9 There were those present who felt an oppression of the spirit engendered by the location. “There is something sinister and depressing about that sound between Guadalcanal and Florida Islands, from which the serrated cone of Savo Island thrusts up like the crest of a giant dinosaur emerging from the ocean depths. It is now hard to dissociate this feeling from events and from the remembrance of those who there met death in its most horrible forms. Yet there is that which eludes analysis. . . . Men who rounded Cape Esperance in the darkness before dawn of 7 August insist that even then they felt an oppression of the spirit—‘It gave you creeps’.” Morison, Vol IV, pp. 282-3.

The Japanese were taken completely by surprise. No outlying scouts were met to give the alarm. Whatever hope had inspired him who christened that northernmost point of Guadalcanal “Esperance”, hope was certainly justified as the ships of Squadron X steamed in the darkness, unchallenged and unmolested, through the seven-mile passage separating the cape of that name from the dead, jungle-covered volcanic cone of Savo Island to the northward. Here was deep, open water in the approaches to the sound, both south and north of Savo. The shoal water was farther eastward, between Florida and Guadalcanal, and in and around the Tulagi disembarkation area. The shoals linking Florida and Guadalcanal, threaded by Nggela, Sealark, and Lengo Channels, afforded some protection to the two disembarkation areas against surface attack from the eastward. Several of the cruisers carried navigational insurance in the persons of merchant service masters familiar with these waters through long association, who had volunteered their services as advisers, and pilots if necessary. Captain William Wilding, of Burns Philp and Company, was in H.M.A.S. Australia, and others were in some of the American cruisers.

The overcast had melted away, and the clear sky was luminous with stars. The sea was smooth. The south-easterly wind was a zephyr. Dawn came with the suddenness of the latitude, and it was not full daylight when the rumble of motors heralded the 6.15 a.m. catapulting of the aircraft of both squadrons’ cruisers to carry out continuous anti-submarine air patrols of both entrances to the sound. Before the aircraft were launched, the Japanese on shore were startled to wakefulness and watchfulness by the sounds of gunfire. It had been reported that there were enemy batteries at Kukum, near Lunga Point and the X Group’s disembarkation area. Quincy was called up from the rear of the formation, with the responsibility of dealing with the enemy guns, and she opened fire at 6.13. At the same time U.S. Ships Selfridge and Dewey attacked with gunfire a small schooner crossing towards Kukum from the north, and set her heavily on fire. Simultaneously the sky became noisy with the engines of Admiral Fletcher’s carrier-borne aircraft sweeping in to their targets, and with the cracking of their gunfire and the bursting of bombs in the Gavutu-Tulagi area and on Guadalcanal. Some 36 fighters and 48 dive bombers were engaged on various missions. Those attacking Gavutu-Tulagi destroyed 18 Japanese seaplanes on the water in their initial sortie.

At 6.23 Australia fired three salvos of 8-inch at a beach village between Lunga and Tenaru. The sun rose at 6.33 and revealed the scrub and tree-covered coastline, painted the kunai plains and green ridges, and illuminated the darker jungle-covered mountains lifting some 8,000 feet in the interior. Fourteen minutes later the X Group transports reached their disembarkation area off Lunga Point, 20 miles E.S.E. of Cape Esperance, and a little less than one-third of the distance along Guadalcanal’s northern coast. There they remained under way but stopped, outside the 100 fathom

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*Dewey*, US destroyer (1934), 1,345 tons, four 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 36 knots.
line. Screening groups took up their positions—an outer arc of destroyers, with the cruisers between them and the transports. Thus both cruisers and transports had an anti-submarine screen, and attacking aircraft would have to pass two outer circles of gunfire before reaching the transports. The question of anti-submarine protection weighed heavily with Admiral Crutchley as commander of the screening groups. Reports from 17th July onwards of the presence of Japanese submarines in the Gavutu-Tulagi-Guadalcanal area led him to consider “that this form of enemy attack would be highly probable by day and night”. This influenced screen dispositions, and also led to the commendable precaution of maintaining continuous anti-submarine patrol by the cruisers’ aircraft. The aircraft allocated to the screening groups when in the combat area were: two fighter squadrons (carrier-based and providing fighter protection against air attack, with fighter direction by a carrier team in Chicago), and eight cruiser-borne seaplanes. Four of the seaplanes were mostly engaged on liaison work. The remaining four, armed with anti-submarine bombs, kept a continuous anti-submarine patrol over the combat area.

The first landing boats were in the water by 6.53 a.m., and by 8 a.m. the first waves of boats were forming up off the beach between Lunga Point and Tagoma about nine miles east. At 9 a.m. Quincy, Vincennes, Astoria, and Dewey, Hull, Ellet and Wilson, which had been bombarding targets along the coast, carried out an intensive bombardment of the landing beaches and vicinity, and a few minutes later the first wave landed on Guadalcanal without opposition. The second wave landed at 9.30, and boats then began a regular ferry service between ships and shore.

Across the sound at Tulagi, the first landing on the south-western side of the small island was a little over an hour earlier than that on Guadalcanal. It followed an intensive bombardment by the Fire Support Group—San Juan and destroyers Monsen and Buchanan—and, like that across the sound, was unopposed. With the first wave at Tulagi there landed, as guides for the Marines, two R.A.N.V.R. officers, Sub-Lieutenants Horton and Josselyn. A third, Waddell, was to have been with them,

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17th July, four small S/Ms off Haleta; 21st July, two small S/Ms Tulagi Harbour; 21st July, mother ship and small S/Ms off Kukum, Guadalcanal; 26th July, 15,000-ton mother ship and three S/Ms off Kukum; on 7th August a periscope was sighted by San Juan and destroyers in the Tulagi transport area; and there were reports of enemy submarines proceeding towards the Solomons on 6th, 7th, and 8th August. These reports included one from CinPac on the 8th: “One division Subron 7 and units Subron 3 en route Florida and Solomon Islands.”

Admiral Crutchley, Explanatory Memorandum, amplifying answers to questions raised by Admiral A. J. Hepburn, U.S.N. (21st February 1943).

6 Hull, US destroyer (1935), 1,395 tons, four 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 36 knots. Sunk off Luzon, 18 Dec 1944.

7 Ellet and Wilson, US destroyers (1939), 1,500 tons, four 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 34 knots.

8 Monsen and Buchanan, US destroyers (1941-42), 1,630 tons, four 5-in guns, five 21-in torpedo tubes, 33 knots. Monsen sunk off Guadalcanal, 13 Nov 1942.

9 Lt D. C. Horton, DSC, Coastwatcher, RANVR; RNVR 1943-46. District Officer; of British Solomon Is; b. Calcutta, India, 2 Mar 1915.


11 Lt A. N. A. Waddell, DSC; Coastwatcher, RANVR. District Officer; of British Solomon Is; b. Eassie, Scotland, 8 Nov 1913.
but went down with an attack of malaria and was unable to take part. The second wave landed a few minutes after the first.

IX

The Japanese, away north in Rabaul, kept Zone Nine time, nine hours ahead of Greenwich, while the Allies in the southern Solomons kept Zone Eleven time, eleven hours fast on Greenwich. The two-hour discrepancy exists between Japanese and Allied reports of the happenings of these days of August 1942. Thus the first intimation of the Allied attack: “Tulagi being heavily bombarded from air and sea,” was received in Rabaul at 4.30 a.m. on the 7th. The Eighth Fleet staff were aroused from sleep, and assembled at headquarters to find a situation that “looked most discouraging”. Successive reports did nothing to brighten the prospect, the seriousness of which was brought home with the 8 a.m. Tulagi message “The enemy force is overwhelming,” which Rabaul heard at 6.5 a.m. (In order to simplify this account, times mentioned from here on will be brought into line by advancing those in the Japanese reports by two hours.)

The weight of the attack and the forces involved made it apparent to commander Eighth Fleet that this was an all-out invasion, and plans to counter it were hastily formulated. The aircraft of the 25th Air Flotilla, standing by for the intended raid on Milne Bay, were diverted to this new target, and at 9.30 a.m. 27 medium bombers escorted by 17 fighters took off from Rabaul on this mission. Naval surface forces were ordered to make ready for a night attack on the invasion forces. Five submarines of Squadron 7 were ordered to concentrate for attack on Guadalcanal. The XVII Army staff were confident that it would not be difficult to expel the invaders, but, in reply to a suggestion that the Nankai Detachment now on its way to Buna be diverted to Guadalcanal, said that this could not be decided at XVII Army level. As speed was essential, Commander Eighth Fleet hastily organised a reinforcement unit of 310 riflemen with machine-guns, and 100 men of the 5th Sasebo Special Naval Landing Force and 81st Garrison Unit. This force embarked in the Meiyo Maru (5,628 tons) and headed for Guadalcanal escorted by Tsugaru and supply ship Soya.

Eighth Fleet planners were disturbed at their hurried labours by an air alert at 11.30 a.m.

Enemy daylight attacks were a novelty at this time, and all of us at headquarters rushed outside to see what was happening. There were thirteen American B-17’s [Flying Fortresses] flying eastward at about 7,000 metres. We decided that they were making a strike at Vunakanau air base in support of the enemy’s operations at Guadalcanal, and therefore we returned to the myriad urgent details of planning that screamed for our attention.

Dick Horton, Henry Josselyn, and Nick Waddell were three young District Officers from the British Solomon Islands Administration. Lieut-Commander Hugh Mackenzie met them in Vila, and on his recommendation, and with the consent of the Resident Commissioner, Marchant, they were commissioned sub-lieutenants R.A.N.V.R., and taken into the Coastwatching Service. All were under 30, and had sound local knowledge of the Solomons.

Naval aircraft at Rabaul under the command of Eighth Fleet on 7th August were: 32 medium bombers; 16 dive bombers; and 34 Zero fighters.
The Japanese assumption was correct. The aircraft attacked Vunakanau and later claimed to have shot down seven out of 20 intercepting fighters.

About the same time as the air alert was sounded in Rabaul, the Allied ships at Tulagi and Guadalcanal landing areas heard (11.37 a.m.) the direct voice of coastwatcher Mason in southern Bougainville (who a couple of days earlier had been told cryptically by radio to use as his call sign the first three letters of the surname of his married sister—Mrs. Stokie—and to report aircraft in plain language to save time) giving the preliminary warning of the approach of the Japanese air striking force: "From STO. Twenty-four bombers headed yours." Twenty-five minutes later, having traversed the alternative channel through Port Moresby, Townsville, and Canberra, the warning was heard throughout the Pacific in the far-reaching radio voice of Pearl Harbour. Simultaneously with the receipt of Mason's original warning, Admiral Crutchley received an Intelligence report from South Pacific command that enemy submarines were on the move. This followed depth-charge attacks at 8 a.m. on a submarine in the Tulagi area, repeatedly sighted by San Juan and several destroyers.

When Mason's first warning was received the Japanese aircraft were still some 320 miles from their objective, and steps were taken to receive them. The ships prepared for evasive tactics. The carrier-borne fighter aircraft were concentrated for defence under the direction of the fighter direction group in Chicago. At 1.15 p.m. the ships heard the "Tally Ho" on the fighter direction voice radio as defending fighters intercepted the enemy aircraft about 15 miles west of Savo Island. Those which got through the fighters' defences, "about eighteen bombers coming over in tight formation and supported by nine Zero fighters" said Captain Farncomb in Australia's Report of Proceedings, were engaged by all ships in Squadron X with gunfire at 1.23 p.m. The leader of the enemy formation signalled "bomb release" with a bright light, and a pattern-bombing attack resulted in "all bombs falling to the N.W. of the transports and clear of the screening ships; rather a poor shot". This enemy attack was confined to the Guadalcanal group. Away to the northward, Henley, carrying out anti-submarine patrol at the Tulagi landings, recorded in her War Diary: "1.20 p.m. sighted approximately 27 aircraft attacking Squadron X at Guadalcanal. 1.21 air attack being fought off by A/A fire from ships in transport area X. Sighted one enemy plane shot down. 1.23 p.m. sighted bomb explosion in vicinity of area X. No damage visible."

An hour and a half later the Allied forces were again attacked, this time by a force of dive bombers from Rabaul. "At 1500," recorded Farncomb in Australia, "ten dive bombers were sighted near Cape Esperance, almost coincidentally with a report on the Fighter Direction of '10 enemy bombers over Guadalcanal'. These attacked and obtained one hit on Mugford [it killed 22 men, but did little damage to the vessel] who was the most westerly screening destroyer." This attack cost the Japanese five of their nine dive bombers, lost to carrier-borne fighters and ships' gunfire.
These air attacks, and those of the next day, moved Farncomb to comment, in his report of the operation:

Before the operation started we had heard that the shore-based aircraft from the Australian Command were going to interdict on enemy aerodromes prior to our arrival in the Solomons. Our first day's experience did not inspire us with much confidence in the efficiency of the "interdiction", for not only did a large force of high level bombers and fighters from Rabaul, 600 miles away, manage to get at us, but a team of dive bombers, quite unexpectedly, did so as well. The second day's attack by 40 T.B's and H.L.B's subsequently confirmed our opinions on the value of this interdiction; and we were glad indeed that we had U.S. naval aircraft cooperating directly with us.4

It might be remarked that the value of those U.S. naval aircraft would have been considerably reduced without the forewarning by the Bougainville coastwatchers.

By 2 p.m. on the 7th, Mikawa and his staff, working hurriedly in Rabaul on the plans for the projected surface attack, had completed them and sent them to Tokyo. Their reception was unfavourable. Admiral Osamu Nagano, Chief of the Naval General Staff, "considered the plan dangerous and reckless, and, at first, ordered that it be stopped immediately. Upon further consideration and after consultation with his staff, he decided to respect the local commander's plan".5 Chokai entered Rabaul harbour at 4 p.m. on the 7th—just as the aircraft of the first striking force returned from Guadalcanal, five bombers and two fighters short of its departure strength that morning—and sailed again half an hour later with Mikawa and his staff on board, and with Tenryu (Rear-Admiral Matsuyama), Yubari, and destroyer Yunagi in company. Three hours out of Rabaul, they met the four heavy cruisers of the 6th Division from Kavieng, and "thus it was that our seven cruisers and one destroyer were assembled for the first time". As darkness fell, shortly after cruising disposition was taken up, an enemy submarine was detected "to the south", and course was altered to the east, successfully to avoid it. This was the American S 38 from Brisbane, whose captain, Lieut-Commander H. G. Munson, reported by radio "two destroyers and three larger ships of unknown type" proceeding south-easterly, and later stated that the Japanese ships had passed so close that he had felt their wash, and had been unable to fire

4 Australian Command air attacks on Japanese airfields in this "interdiction" operation were:
3 Aug—Two Catalina flying boats attacked Lae-Salamaua.
6 Aug—Six medium bombers (B-26) attacked Lae. Seven medium bombers (B-25) attacked Salamaua.
7 Aug—13 heavy bombers (Fortresses) attacked Rabaul. Ten medium bombers (B-26) attacked Lae. Three Catalinas attacked Lae.
8 Aug—One Catalina, two Fortresses, 11 medium bombers (B-26), six medium bombers (B-25) attacked Lae-Salamaua.
8-9 Aug—Two Catalinas attacked Rabaul.
9 Aug—Eight Fortresses attacked Rabaul; eight mediums (B-26) attacked Salamaua; one Fortress attacked Gasmata.
10 Aug—Two Catalinas attacked Rabaul.

At this period, of course, the Australian Command had also the Japanese invasion of Buna to deal with. The attention paid to Lae-Salamaua indicates this.

5 Ohmae, "The Battle of Savo Island", p. 1270. Ohmae quoted Captain Sadamu Sanagi, who was on the Naval General Staff at the time.
torpedoes. Munson, whose sighting report was received (via Comsouwes-pacfor, Vice-Admiral Leary) by Crutchley at 7.39 a.m. on 8th August, had better luck with torpedoes some hours later when, at midnight on the 8th, he intercepted *Meiyo Maru* and her escorts off Cape St George, New Ireland, and sank the transport with two torpedo hits. The report of enemy warships at sea near their base at Rabaul was by itself not particularly significant. If the enemy force made for Guadalcanal, it should be found the next day by Allied reconnaissance aircraft, whose search plans were designed with that purpose.

At dawn on the 8th, when his force was steaming south-east to the eastward of Bougainville, Mikawa catapulted five scouting seaplanes from his cruisers. They reported, at Guadalcanal and Tulagi, a count of Allied ships that "cast serious doubts on the results reported by our earlier air attacks, which had claimed two cruisers, a destroyer, and six transports sunk, plus three cruisers and two transports heavily damaged". Of importance to Mikawa was the negative information regarding American carriers. "We judged that if the enemy carriers were not within 100 miles of Guadalcanal there would be little to fear of a carrier-based attack unless it came this morning, or unless we approached too close to the island before sunset." Mikawa accordingly told his captains that he would go through Bougainville Strait, and then pass down the strait between Santa Ysabel and New Georgia Islands (later to become known as "The Slot") to approach Guadalcanal for a night attack at about half an hour after midnight. This time was later put back to 1.30 a.m. on the 9th. At 10.26 on the 8th, when he was some 30 miles north-east of Keta, Mikawa was sighted by a Hudson aircraft piloted by Sergeant Stutt of No. 32 Squadron, RAAF. A float plane took off in an attempt to intercept the Hudson which successfully gained cloud cover over Bougainville, but was unable immediately to report the sighting of the enemy fleet because of radio failure. Mikawa assumed that his intentions were now known, and that he would be the subject of more Allied reconnaissance and, probably, of air attack. He therefore decided to delay his approach to Guadalcanal, and put back his attack one hour.

Stutt’s aircraft reached Milne Bay at 12.42 p.m., 2 hours 16 minutes after sighting the Japanese fleet, having attacked two surfaced submarines en route. The aircraft was met by jeep and the crew taken to the operations room for debriefing, where they reported the sighting of “three cruisers, three destroyers, two seaplane tenders or gunboats, course 120 degrees, speed 15 knots”. This report, however, did not reach Crutchley until 6.17 p.m. on the 8th.

Another search, which would almost certainly have disclosed Mikawa’s
presence and indicated his intention, was unfortunately not carried out. On 7th August Admiral Turner requested Admiral McCain to send a Catalina reconnaissance aircraft north-west from Espiritu Santo via Malaita, even though it would cover part of the search area for which MacArthur's land-based aircraft were responsible. This search was not made and, in the words of Crutchley's Staff Officer Operations and Intelligence, Commander Gatacre, "incredibly, neither Crutchley nor Turner was informed".¹

Thus arose an unfortunate combination of circumstances which aided Mikawa in preserving the anonymity of his force, its composition, and its likely intention. The lateness of the receipt of the aircraft's report precluded a further and possibly more revealing search by air. "Course 120 degrees" as given in the report, calculated from the position in which they were sighted, would take the Japanese ships not through Bougainville Strait, but to the eastward of Choiseul and Santa Ysabel Islands; and "15 knots" was the sort of speed to be expected of converted merchantmen seaplane tenders. Thus the wording of the report led both Turner and Crutchley to the opinion that the Japanese force was of two seaplane tenders on passage with an escort; and the course led Turner to the view that the Japanese were bound for Rekata Bay on the western end of Santa Ysabel's north coast, there to establish a seaplane base from which to deliver torpedo bomber attacks on the Allied ships. Unfortunately, that was the last sighting of Mikawa's force—and it left the Allied admirals to conjecture on its composition, its destination, and its mission.

It was just after 2 p.m. on the 8th when the Japanese ships cleared Bougainville Strait and increased speed to 24 knots, unseen though "the sea was dead calm, and visibility was, if anything, too good". The coastwatchers, whose reports of approaching aircraft were of priceless value, were impotent in this instance. Mason was on Malabita Hill overlooking Buin and the waters embraced by Shortland, Fauro, and Bougainville Islands. Mikawa passed well to the eastward, sheltered from observation by some 40 miles of distance. Such aircraft as were within their ken while the ships were in Bougainville Strait were "friendly planes returning towards Rabaul by twos and threes. The lack of formation indicated that they had encountered heavy fighting. We watched them with grateful eyes." And, south of Bougainville Strait, as they sped down "The Slot", those in the ships followed audibly the aircraft of Fletcher's carriers returning to their ships after helping to repel the Japanese torpedo bomber attack on the Amphibious Force and its screening ships that morning. Those in Chokai "heard, loud and clear, much talk of flight deck conditions as planes approached their landing pattern, such as 'Green Base' and 'Red Base'." Mikawa concluded that he could be fairly sure of no air attack on the 8th, but that he would suffer "an all-out attack from their carriers on the following day. The very existence of the enemy flattops in the area was a

¹ Gatacre, in a post-war statement.
major concern to Admiral Mikawa, and this dominated our later tactical concepts.”

Late in the afternoon Mikawa passed his battle plans to his captains—to penetrate the sound south of Savo Island, torpedo the main Allied force at Guadalcanal, turn north to the Tulagi area, strike there with torpedoes and gunfire, and withdraw north of Savo. At 6.30 p.m. the ships jettisoned all deck fire hazards, and assumed night battle formation, single column on Chokai, with 1,300 yards between ships. Mikawa completed the Nelsonian touch of his plan with an “Every man is expected to do his best” signal to his sailors. Speeding south-east through darkness intermittently thickened by rain squalls, the ships trailed ghostly white streamer fingers from their signal yardarms as identification marks. Just after 11 p.m. they catapulted their aircraft for tactical reconnaissance; and, when it wanted but a quarter hour to the middle watch that was so pregnant with triumph and disaster, increased speed to 26 knots. Hands went to action stations at midnight on the 8th, as speed was lifted two knots more, and the ships drove swiftly and purposefully through the night.

X

In the Guadalcanal and Tulagi landing areas at the end of this, the second day of Watchtower, the situation was not quite as favourable as had been expected. Japanese opposition was particularly obstinate on the Tulagi side (where most of the defenders, true to their radio message to Rabaul, literally “fought to the death”) and Tulagi was not in Allied hands until the afternoon of 8th August, nor were Gavutu and Tanambogo subdued until nearly midnight of that day. There were some 5,000 Americans on shore on that side. Because of this, unloading of transports there had scarcely begun. On the Guadalcanal side, where some 11,000 Marines had landed by the evening of the 7th, the invaders were established from Tenaru to Kukum, including the airfield. The defenders, about 2,000, mostly labour troops, retired to the inland hills after only token resistance. Unloading operations were delayed by congestion on the beach, and also by air warnings, and air raids in which some damage was suffered by the ships.

At 10.27 a.m. on the 8th Crutchley received a message from the faithful coastwatchers on Bougainville: “Forty heavy bombers proceeding south-east.” Shortly afterwards the transports weighed, and the ships took up defensive dispositions. Australia was the first to see the attackers, and opened fire with her 8-inch and 4-inch gun batteries at noon on 23 torpedo bombers coming in low from the eastward over the southern tip of Florida Island. All ships at once joined in with heavy anti-aircraft fire. Many of the bombers were shot down in flames. The Japanese later admitted to the loss of 17 torpedo bombers, and casualties were also inflicted on a number of dive bombers which carried out a synchronised attack. The

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8 Gatacre later recalled that “USN officers at that time were amazed at 8-inch being used against aircraft, and were very impressed by the effectiveness of 8-inch barrage fire”.
destroyer *Jarvis* was hit by a torpedo, and suffered hull damage. She could, however, steam at between four and seven knots. She was sailed to Vila that night. Her orders were to proceed eastward through the Sealert Channel, but for some reason unknown she went westward and was sunk next day by Japanese aircraft with the loss of all hands—247 officers and men. Another casualty in the Japanese air attack on the 8th was the transport *George F. Elliott*, which was set on fire when an aircraft crashed into her superstructure. The fires got out of hand and she was abandoned, and grounded in the shoal water south of Florida Island.

Under the terms of his directive as second-in-command of Task Force 62 and commander of the screening groups, Admiral Crutchley was responsible for screening the transports of both X and Y Squadrons against Japanese surface, air, and submarine attack. Actually, events tend to indicate that both he and Admiral Turner placed the likelihood of enemy attack in the order air, submarine, surface. They were in agreement that dispositions against air attack should be the transports ringed by cruisers and, outside them again, destroyers. This ensured room for manoeuvre, and the protection of the transports by a double ring of gunfire. It proved most effective in the air attacks on the 7th and 8th. Crutchley considered submarine attack in the combat area highly probable by day and night—and his feeling in this was supported by Intelligence reports. The inner and outer screening circles afforded protection to the transports against submarine attack as well as against air attack, and in addition Crutchley maintained a continuous anti-submarine patrol by cruisers' seaplanes.

As to surface attack, this was not anticipated by day, but if it materialised Crutchley planned to intercept the enemy force outside the sound, remaining interposed between the enemy and the transport groups, but having room for manoeuvre. To guard against enemy attack by night, special dispositions were made. It was necessary for these to ensure as far as possible the provision of an adequate anti-submarine and anti-motor-torpedo boat screen, adequate anti-aircraft defences, and the denial to enemy surface forces of any approach to the transports. Such approach could be made from the north-west through either of the wide, unobstructed passages north and south of Savo Island, and (though this, because of navigational difficulties, was less likely except possibly by light craft) through Lengo, Sealert, or Nggela Channels from the east. To guard against all possible forms of enemy attack, Crutchley had six heavy cruisers: *Australia, Canberra, Chicago, Vincennes, Astoria, Quincy*; two light cruisers, *Hobart* and *San Juan*; and 15 destroyers.

In deciding how to use these he was influenced by various considerations, the main one being how best to ensure that the enemy could not reach the transports. The question of keeping the six heavy cruisers concentrated was considered, and discarded because Crutchley felt (a) that their concentration with two main western entrances to guard enhanced the chances of a hostile force slipping through undetected and unengaged; (b) that in his opinion heavy ships in groups of more than four were unwieldy at
night; and (c) "neither *Australia* nor *Canberra* were fitted with T.B.S.,\(^3\) and they had done some night training with *Chicago* and Desron 4, but none with the other cruisers, thus it was my firm intention to avoid handling a mixed force at night".\(^4\) Instead, therefore, of concentrating, he formed two heavy cruiser groups, one—*Australia, Canberra, Chicago*—patrolling in an area south-east of Savo Island and covering the southern entrance; the other—*Vincennes, Astoria, Quincy*—patrolling in an area north-east of Savo, guarding the northern entrance. Crutchley made this detailed composition of forces because:

I had three heavy cruisers from Task Force 44, partially trained to a method of night fighting and possessing a Task Force 44 doctrine Cruising and Operating Procedure. I had three heavy cruisers which I had never seen but all were U.S.N. and, therefore, to some extent certain to be used to each other's methods. I therefore decided to block one Savo entrance with the three heavy cruisers I knew I could command and leave the other Savo entrance to the three U.S. vessels.

In his "Special Instructions to Screening Group and Vessels Temporarily Assigned", which had been discussed with Turner and approved by him for distribution on 29th July, Crutchley described the composition of the two heavy cruiser groups he intended to use, and added:

Either or both groups may be brought against the enemy depending on the size and composition of his force. . . . If both *Australia* and *Vincennes* groups are ordered to attack the enemy, it is my intention that *Vincennes* group shall act independently of the *Australia* group but shall conform generally to the movements of the *Australia* group so as to give greatest mutual support.

The two light cruisers were allotted an area for night patrol covering the approach channels from the east. These channels were more likely to be used by light enemy surface craft or submarines, and the two light cruisers were the logical choice for this task. An additional advantage was that the use of *San Juan* provided a flag officer (Rear-Admiral Norman Scott, U.S.N.) in this ship. Of the fifteen destroyers, *Bagley* and *Patterson* were allocated to the *Australia* group and *Helm* and *Wilson* to the *Vincennes* group, as anti-submarine screen; and two to the light cruiser group. Seven were charged with the anti-submarine protection of the two transport groups. And two, *Ralph Talbot* and *Blue*, were radar guard ships to seaward of Savo Island, covering the entrances to warn of any approaching enemy. All ships were, by Crutchley's order, to be in "status of readiness number one for action". This had been ordered at midday on 6th August, and not relaxed except for the modification: "For the present when in first degree of readiness, small numbers may in turn be sent from their quarters to get meals."

These dispositions and patrols had operated on the night 7th-8th August without incident. At 6.30 p.m. on the 8th, Crutchley ordered the screening forces to take up night dispositions as for the previous night. *Australia*, with destroyers *Patterson* to port and *Bagley* to starboard broad on the bows, led *Canberra* and *Chicago*, in that order, ships three cables apart,

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\(^3\) Talk-Between-Ships. Voice radio.

\(^4\) Crutchley, Explanatory Memorandum, 21 Feb 1943.
steaming 12 knots, patrolling an area between Lunga Point and Savo Island, cruising backwards and forwards parallel to and five miles from the Guadalcanal coast, on courses approximately N.W. by W. on the leg towards Savo, and S.E. by E. on the return leg, reversing course every hour. The northern group, under the tactical command of Captain F. L. Riefkohl in *Vincennes*, employed a box patrol, steaming at 10 knots in a square, turning 90 degrees every half hour. *Vincennes*, with destroyers *Helm* and *Wilson* broad on her bows, led *Quincy* and *Astoria* at three cables intervals.

At 8.45 p.m. Crutchley received a dispatch from Admiral Turner recalling him to the transport area to attend a conference in his flagship, the transport *McCawley*. Fletcher had announced his intention of withdrawing the carriers, and the immediate future of the transports and screening groups with the consequent removal of their air cover was a matter of urgent concern. To have attempted the 20 miles by barge might well have meant Crutchley grogging around the area most of the night, cut off from all that was going on through lack of communication and through having abandoned his flagship, with the possibility of not even finding *McCawley*, so he handed over charge of the patrol to Captain Bode, U.S.N., in *Chicago*, at 8.55 p.m. and *Australia* left the screen for X transport group. Bode directed *Canberra* to lead the line in place of *Australia*, thus avoiding altering dispositions.

The night wore on. It was hot, oppressive, moonless, overcast, its gloomy caverns intermittently revealed by lightning flashes, or curtained by rain squalls. Visibility varied from 100 to 15,000 yards. There were light N.E. airs and a smooth sea. *Canberra* was in modified second degree of readiness. Half the Armament and Damage Control parties were closed up; the men off watch rested in the vicinity of their action stations; the aircraft was de-fuelled, but bombed up with four 100-lb bombs; all guns were empty.

At midnight on the 8th, Lieut-Commander Mesley, the navigator, put
the ship on the S.E. by E. leg. Captain Getting was on the bridge. He and Mesley had discussed the Hudson aircraft's report of "three cruisers, three destroyers, two seaplane tenders or gunboats" received earlier that night. Mesley checked the reported position on the chart. Getting thought the report "referred to normal inter-island traffic. He actually mentioned that at Navy Office, Melbourne, there were constant reports of similar traffic." About fifteen minutes after midnight Mesley (who was handling the ship all day, and was called at least every two hours throughout the night) went below to his sea cabin for a brief sleep, after directing the Officer of the Watch (Sub-Lieutenant Gregory) to have him called at 1.45 a.m. to make the hourly course change and check the ship's position at 2 a.m. Soon afterwards, Getting also left the bridge to rest in his sea cabin. (Getting's normal night routine, the Torpedo Officer later reported, was to make "a particular point of never switching a light on in his cabin after darken ship because of the effect it would have on his eyes. He slept—if he slept at all—fully clothed in a chair at the end of a voice-pipe from the compass platform.") There remained on the bridge the O.O.W., the Principal Control Officer, Lieut-Commander Wight; the Midshipman of the Watch; Yeoman of the Watch; lookouts, and others.

At 1 a.m. course was altered to N.W. by W. (These regular alterations were made without signal, the cruisers altering 180 degrees in succession to starboard, the destroyers resuming their stations on the new course.) At intervals from midnight there had been sounds of single aircraft flying overhead. At 1 a.m. Wight reported this to Getting. They were heard in the other ships, too—and in some instances running lights burned by the aircraft were sighted—of the northern group as well as the southern. But the consensus of opinion was that they must be friendly aircraft, and the assertion of a junior officer in Quincy that they must be enemy "was regarded by his seniors as mildly hysterical". Why, if they were enemy, was there no warning from C.T.F. 62, Admiral Turner? Ralph Talbot, the northern radar picquet destroyer outside Savo, sighted one of the aircraft, identified it as a cruiser-type float-plane, and at midnight broadcast a warning which, despite numerous repetitions, failed to reach Turner. Hence his silence on this matter—a silence which strengthened those of the screening groups, who heard Ralph Talbot's warning, in their assumption that the aircraft were friendly. But they were not friendly aircraft. Instead they were Mikawa's scouts. And they continued to drone overhead, unmolested, unhampered in their reporting back to him every movement of the ships beneath them.

At 1.40 a.m. Canberra was nearing the north-western extremity of her patrol. She steamed quietly along at 12 knots, her turrets trained fore and

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8 Mesley, evidence at the inquiry into the loss of Canberra.


3 Morison, Vol 4, p. 44.
aft. Many of her company were asleep. Some seven miles ahead of her was Savo Island. Fifteen miles ahead of her, in the open sea beyond Savo, U.S.S. Blue steamed across her track with radar eye sweeping the murky night to discover and warn of any approaching enemy. Blue, this guardian Cerberus of the southern portal, was seen at intervals by Canberra through the Australian cruiser’s radar eye, for Canberra was using her Type 271 radar set for surface warning. It had, on previous occasions, detected the approach of cruisers at a distance of 30 nautical miles. On this night it was less penetrating. “In the area in which we were,” Sub-Lieutenant Medley⁴ Canberra’s R.D.F. Officer subsequently told the Board of Inquiry, “operation of the set was extremely difficult, and not of very much value in my opinion . . . because of the surrounding land.” Through it the operators could see Blue at intervals, and the other ships of the southern patrol group. But they did not sight any of the cruisers in the northern group. Nor did they sight any enemy.

Nor did Blue. And already, at 1.40 a.m. on the 9th, undetected, inside Blue’s protective screen, within the sheltering loom of Savo Island whose camouflaging shadow was intensified by a low-hung rain squall, was Chokai at the head of the Japanese column, followed by Aoba, Kako, Kinugasa, Furutaka, Tenryu, Yubari and Yunagi in that order, racing in at 30 knots, every man tensed to immediate action, every one of their guns (34 of them 8-inch) and 60 torpedo tubes loaded and trained. And even then Chokai’s torpedoes leapt into the water as she joined battle with a still unsuspecting foe.

XI

As Mesley, in Canberra, put that ship on the S.E. by E. leg of her patrol at midnight on the 8th, Mikawa’s men went to action stations. Forty minutes later those on Chokai’s bridge saw Savo Island loom up fine on the port bow. Only another three minutes had passed when a Japanese lookout reported a ship three points on the starboard bow. It was identified as a destroyer, crossing from starboard, and distant about six miles. There were a few electric moments as, with every gun trained on her, the Japanese watched the destroyer—which was Blue, just approaching the turning point on her patrol. Mikawa slowed from 28 to 22 knots and ported his helm, and suddenly Blue, whose lookouts failed to see the Japanese, reversed course. Almost simultaneously the Japanese sighted Ralph Talbot on the port bow. She had already reached the limit of her westerly leg and had turned eastward, and also failed to sight the approaching enemy. This failure of the two picquet destroyers to sight the enemy, either by radar or visual means, is inexplicable. They had been selected for this duty because in the opinion of Comdesron 4 they had the most effective radar and radar operating capability of the nine ships in his squadron, and they had shown, in fair conditions, a certain pick-up range of not less than 10 miles on a cruiser target. Their plotted patrol beats

⁴Lt D. J. Medley, RANVR. HMAS Canberra 1942; Officer-in-Charge RAN Radar Lab 1942-45. Student; of Melbourne; b. London, 17 Aug 1919.
outside Savo were calculated by Gatacre (allowing a radar pick-up range of about seven miles) to cover any normal enemy approach to the Savo entrances. Yet their radar now failed to detect a force including five heavy cruisers approaching from a direction clear of obstacles. As to visual sighting, it is almost unbelievable that a column of heavy ships could steam close between two destroyers in this way, see them, but not be sighted by them. Events proved that Gatacre's calculations as to the positioning of the destroyers were correct. Mikawa should have been detected by both of them.

Thus fortune favoured Mikawa, who, unperceived, led his column between the two American destroyers which steamed away from it at right angles, on either side. At 1.30 a.m. on the 9th Mikawa increased speed to 30 knots. Six minutes later he detached destroyer Yunagi, last ship in his column, to guard his rear against possible attack by the destroyers he had passed. And then the Japanese sighted a destroyer to port (it was Jarvis, making her crippled way towards Vila) which did not sight them, and which was not attacked with gunfire, though some of the rear Japanese cruisers fired torpedoes at her, all of which missed. A minute later Chokai's lookouts sighted, almost dead ahead, the ships of the southern screening group, dimly seen in the darkness, but suddenly illuminated by a parachute flare released from one of the enemy aircraft over the Guadalcanal transport group. At 1.37 a.m. Chokai's torpedoes hissed from their tubes, and shortly afterwards the flagship, at 4,500 yards, Aoba at 5,500, and Furutaka at 9,000 yards, opened fire with their main batteries.

Meanwhile, on Canberra's bridge, the uneasy peace of the night was suddenly shattered. At 1.40 a.m. Lieut-Commander Wight saw, distant about 6,000 yards four points on the starboard bow, an explosion which appeared to be a torpedo hit. (It was probably one of the torpedoes fired at Jarvis exploding at the end of its run.) At the same time U.S.S. Patterson, five cables on Canberra's starboard bow, altered course to port to cross, and commenced signalling. (She was the only ship to give the alarm, at 1.43 a.m., by T.B.S. "Warning—Warning. Strange ships entering harbour!" It was heard by the cruisers and destroyer Wilson in the northern group. She also reported three ships and their bearing by lamp to Canberra.) Wight sounded action stations. A lookout reported a ship right ahead, but she could not be discerned by either the O.O.W., Gregory, or the Duty Yeoman. She was possibly Patterson. Getting, Mesley, Lieut-

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6 The reports of Canberra differ from those of the three American ships regarding the respective positions on the screen of Patterson and Bagley. All Canberra evidence is that Patterson was on Canberra's starboard bow when the Japanese were first sighted. Wight's evidence at the Inquiry was definite: "Patterson was stationed approximately five cables, bearing Green 30, and she altered course to port to cross our bows and commenced signalling. That was the time of the torpedo explosion—the torpedo explosion was first and then I observed Patterson altering course." Mesley's sketch plan with the original report made by Plunkett-Cole to Crutchley shows Patterson on the starboard bow and Bagley on the port. The American reports were: Patterson—"Patterson screening western flank; Bagley eastern flank of cruisers"; Bagley—"Bagley 45 degrees on starboard bow of Canberra, Patterson on port bow"; Chicago—"USS Bagley and USS Patterson forming a close A/S screen ahead to starboard and port of the formation".  

Captain F. E. Getting, R.A.N.,
Captain of *Canberra* at Guadalcanal.

H.M.A.S. *Canberra*, just before she sank—Battle of Savo Island, 9th August 1942.

W/T dugout at Control Station, headquarters of Deputy Supervising Intelligence Officer, Guadalcanal.
Commanders Hole and Plunkett-Cole, respectively Gunnery and Torpedo Officers, were called. Meanwhile Wight had sighted the wakes of three ships fine on the starboard bow against the blackness of the south end of Savo, and moving from port to starboard. He put the starboard Enemy Bearing Indicator on the left hand ship and ordered “Alarm starboard, Green 20, Load, Load, Load”. He then heard the signalman report “that Patterson reports three ships bearing—I remember the signalman calling out after I had got the guns on—I can’t remember the bearing he said because I was already on”.

The others now arrived on the bridge and Hole took over at the starboard Enemy Bearing Indicator from Wight, who ordered “Port 35 degrees” to open “A” arcs. Mesley took over from Gregory, and Wight and Gregory left the bridge for their respective action stations—Wight aft in X turret, and Gregory in the fore control above the bridge.

As the ship started to swing to the port helm, one of Chokai’s torpedoes was sighted, passing down the starboard side, having approached from fine on the port bow. Getting ordered “Hard a’starboard, full ahead!” Mesley now took over conning the ship. Plunkett-Cole, hearing the helm order, crossed to the port torpedo control position to fire the port tubes. Hole also moved across to the port Enemy Bearing Indicator, and ordered “Open Fire!” Canberra was swinging to starboard. Two flares, or star shell, were burning about 1,000 yards on the starboard beam. The three enemy ships were on the port bow, distant about 1,500 yards. Two more torpedo tracks were sighted ahead crossing from port, and Mesley “felt glad that the wheel was hard over to starboard and telegraphs to full speed as I thought we had a chance to get round in time to clear these tracks and with luck to miss the torpedoes”.

Down in the engine rooms all machinery was running well. The main engines, because of the submarine reports, were at staggered revolutions, 118 on the outer, and 98 on the inner shafts, to give the ship 12 knots. When action alarm sounded the Engineer Commander, McMahon, went to the forward engine room. “At about 1.44 a.m. ‘Full Speed Ahead’ was ordered on both engine room telegraphs. Revolutions were increased very rapidly on all units.”

In the fore control the chain of action initiated by Wight when he caused the Enemy Bearing Indicator alarm gong to ring there had immediate results. The Gunnery Control Officer put the change-over switch to starboard to energise the Director, and ordered turrets “Follow Director”. Within seconds Hole’s voice reached him by voice pipe from the compass platform: “All quarters stand to”, and almost immediately “With S.A.P., Load, Load, Load.” The port Enemy Bearing Indicator was then operated

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7 Capt J. Plunkett-Cole, RAN. HMS Sussex 1939-40; HMAS’s Napier 1940-42, Canberra 1942; Comd HMAS’s Vendetta, Nepal, Norman 1943-45. B. Melbourne, 4 Sep 1906.
9 Evidence at Inquiry into loss of Canberra.
from the compass platform, and the Director Trainer was ordered to “Follow Port”, and turrets to “Follow Director” and to “Open Fire”.

On the port after side of the compass platform Hole was passing orders to gunnery control. Getting was standing alongside him. Mesley, sighting torpedo tracks on each side of the ship, ordered the helm to midships, and then “Port 35”, to check the ship swinging to starboard, and was answered by the Chief Quartermaster from the lower steering position. The enemy ships were now on the port quarter. Mesley shouted down the plot voice pipe “Enemy report two unknown bearing 300 one mile”. Suddenly Mesley was temporarily blinded by an explosion just abaft the compass platform. This was of a shell from the first enemy salvo, which hit and wrecked the Plotting Office. The explosion knocked down Plunkett-Cole at the port torpedo control position on the bridge. He picked himself up and was pressing the pistol triggers when a shell from the second enemy salvo hit on the port after corner of the compass platform. This again dazzled Mesley, and: “When I could see again I saw several people on the deck of the compass platform and recognised the Captain, whose head was within two feet of the Pelorou to which I was clinging.” This shell killed Hole outright, mortally wounded Getting, and killed and wounded others on the compass platform and in the port torpedo control position. There the triggers were unresponsive to Plunkett-Cole’s attempts to fire the torpedoes and, wounded and with patches of fire burning on his overalls, he went up to the compass platform to report to Getting, found there the results of the second hit and Mesley conning the ship, and, as senior effective officer present, temporarily took over. But by then Canberra, without firing a shot, was out of the fight. Mesley had noticed the ship slowing down and listing. The Chief Quartermaster reported that the wheel was useless, and when Mesley ordered “Steer by main engines”, reported that all communications and all power had completely failed. The second Japanese salvo had hit both engine rooms.

Down in the forward engine room at about 1.45 a.m. the main engines were working up to full speed, and revolutions, in that minute since full speed was ordered, were up to about 250 on all engines. There were noises as of gunfire “similar”, McMahon later recalled, “to that experienced when our ship’s armament was firing”. Almost immediately light brown smoke and fumes entered the engine room through the supply fan trunking. Thuds were felt on the ship. Within seconds steam pressure to all units, and in both engine rooms, failed; and simultaneously all lights dimmed and died. Visibility, by torch, was about three feet. Within five minutes of the first alarm both now-useless engine rooms were abandoned.

In the fore control, the Gunnery Control Officer was momentarily blinded by the flash of the shell hit from the first enemy salvo, almost directly

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1 This never got through, as almost simultaneously the Plotting Office was hit and wrecked. Mesley, immediately after the second hit, ordered Chief Yeoman of Sigs C. J. Gunthorpe to make the enemy report. Gunthorpe passed the report to the Radio Communications Office but by then all power had gone. The report was eventually passed over the emergency set, but there was no acknowledgment of its receipt.
found. After the second hit on the compass platform, Sub-Lieutenant Gregory, who had only just arrived in the fore control, "happened to look forward and I saw star shell ahead, and I looked down on the bridge and I noticed several people lying on the bridge—I could make out the Captain as one of them". The turrets reported all main lighting had failed. The Director Trainer reported power gone, and gear was in hand training. An enemy cruiser was sighted on the port beam. She "passed through my glass quickly", recalled the Director Gunner, "and only a momentary glance was had. The Director Trainer had no target in his glasses at any time." So fire was not opened. When power failed Canberra’s turrets were bearing “Red 120 degrees”—searching for their target which by now had disappeared.

In the sick bay was the main body of medical supplies, and the main medical party, comprising Surgeon Commander Downward and eight ratings. There were also a forward party on the forecastle mess deck, and an after party in the wardroom, each commanded by a surgeon lieutenant. All three parties were closed up before the alarm. “Within about five minutes of the alarm sounding,” Downward later reported,

there was a loud explosion in the Sick Bay flat, followed by the screams of wounded. Almost immediately the first casualty appeared with his left arm shot away. A tourniquet had just been adjusted and morphia injected to him and three other casualties, when the lights failed and all water supplies were cut off. From then on it became necessary for members of the first aid party to use their initiative and work as independent units. Very quickly the ship listed to starboard and the Sick Bay flat became untenable owing to heat from fires. The wounded were moved on to the forecastle, where they lay for about three hours in pouring rain. Coats and blankets were used to cover them as well as possible.

Canberra was under fire for only about two minutes. She was hit by at least 24 shells, which came from just before the port beam to fine on the starboard quarter, through astern. She was stopped, listing about eight degrees to starboard, blazing amidships and with many fires burning between decks. And one-sixth of her complement were killed or wounded.

XIII

When, around 1.40 a.m., Patterson, on Canberra’s starboard bow (according to Canberra evidence), altered course to port to cross, it was because she had sighted Chokai dead ahead, steering south-easterly distant about two-and-a-half miles, and changed course to unmask guns and torpedo batteries. A minute later the strange ship changed course to the eastward, and those on Patterson’s bridge saw she was one of three Japanese cruisers—two heavy and one light. Commander Frank R. Walker, Patterson’s captain, ordered “fire torpedoes”—an order that was not heard because at that moment the destroyer’s guns opened fire—and passed an enemy report to Canberra and Chicago by lamp. A brief exchange of gunfire resulted in Patterson being hit and set on fire aft and suffering a number of casualties and, in turn, herself securing some hits on the

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2 Surgeon Capt C. A. Downward, DSC; RAN. HMAS Canberra 1940-42, HMAS’s Kuttabul and Rushcutter 1943-45.
enemy light cruiser. The Japanese drew away to the north-eastward, and the clash was over. It was then about 2 a.m. Patterson made in a general north-eastward direction to a pre-arranged rendezvous five miles north-west of Savo Island.

Bagley, broader out on Canberra's starboard bow, sighted the approaching Japanese fine on her port bow. They appeared to be very close to Savo, steering south-easterly at high speed. Bagley swung hard a'port to bring her starboard battery to bear, but when sights came on it was found that primers had not been inserted. She continued the swing until her port battery bore, when she fired four torpedoes. But at that moment the Japanese ships were lost to view. Bagley observed Canberra turn hard a'starboard, and "open fire with her main battery. Canberra was hit amidships by second or third enemy salvo. An intense fire developed immediately. Chicago appeared to turn right with Canberra, and seemed to open fire at the same time." Bagley, after scanning the passage between Guadalcanal and Savo without sighting anything, also made for the pre-arranged rendezvous. With this failure of both destroyers effectively to fire torpedoes, an opportunity was lost which could have reversed the result of the night action. It was a night in which every link in the chain of events was a faulty one for the Allies.

When those in Bagley saw Chicago swinging hard a'starboard, they saw her reaction to torpedo wakes reported on her starboard bow. That was just four minutes after those on her bridge had been first alerted by two orange flashes near Savo Island. Aircraft flashes were then seen over the transport area, and Canberra swung to starboard. Shortly after Chicago turned to starboard torpedoes were reported crossing from port to starboard, and Chicago swung hard a'port to parallel wakes. But by then the torpedoes were too close aboard, and one struck Chicago on the port bow well forward, deluging the ship to amidships with a lofty column of water. While her damage control parties shored up the forward bulkheads, Chicago received a minor shell hit from a cruiser on her foremast, and briefly and fitfully engaged various targets to the westward (apparently they were the destroyer Yunagi which, overhauling and passing Jarvis to the north of that ship, fired on the American destroyer about 2 a.m.) until, 23 minutes after the first alarm, "all firing ceased, no ships visible". All this time Chicago was steering a mean course of approximately N.W. by W.—with the battle sweeping north-east and northerly, away from her and towards the northern screening group, to which no enemy report (save that from Patterson) had gone, and the ships of which were to be caught as unprepared as those which had already fallen victims to Mikawa's force.4

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4 Bagley's action report. An example of mistaken observation in the "fog of war" of a night action. Chicago, in her action report, also states (1.47 a.m.) "Canberra, now on starboard bow, commenced firing".

4 The complete loss of power prevented transmission from Canberra of Mesley's enemy report. Chicago (Morison, Vol V, p. 39) failed to make an enemy report.

Regarding this, Mikawa subsequently wrote (United States Naval Institute Proceedings, Vol 83, No. 12, p. 1278): "I was greatly impressed . . . by the courageous action of the northern group of US cruisers. They fought back heroically despite heavy damage sustained before they were ready for battle. Had they had even a few minutes' warning of our approach, the results of the action would have been quite different."
When Mikawa led his force north-eastward to round Savo Island, *Furutaka*, fifth in the line, swung more sharply to N. by E., and was followed by *Tenryu* and *Yubari*. The Japanese thus sped towards the northern screening group in two columns, and caught its ships in cross fire. The northern group was steering north-west at 10 knots. Those in the ships heard the Japanese aircraft from midnight onwards, at times, as *Quincy* recorded, “close aboard”, but concluded they were friendly. About 1.40 the star shell over the transport area at Guadalcanal was seen from all ships. Those in *Quincy* thought it was from destroyers seeking the aircraft which had been heard. Then *Quincy* heard *Patterson*’s “Warning, Warning! Strange ships entering harbour,” and went to action stations. Soon afterwards the silhouettes of three cruisers were sighted rounding the southern end of Savo Island. These immediately burned searchlights, and opened fire.

*Astoria*, rear ship in the American column, was the first to be hit. Her initial warning was the sighting of star shell to the south. She went to action stations, and next moment was caught in the Japanese searchlights, and was the target for *Chokai*’s opening salvo in this phase, short and ahead. *Astoria* replied quickly with a six-gun salvo. But fire was then checked because her captain, just arrived on the bridge, thought fire had been opened on friendly ships. *Chokai* fired four salvos without hitting, but *Astoria*’s delay gave her enemy time to find the range and close, and a salvo into the American ship’s superstructure set her ablaze, and lit the target for the Japanese gunners. From then on it was but a matter of minutes before she was a flaming, immobile, powerless wreck, the victim of “at least 17 large calibre hits and innumerable small calibre hits”. In return she fired 12 salvos from her main batteries, and “one enemy vessel was definitely hit and possibly two”. First to be hit, *Astoria* was the last of the northern group ships to sink. She remained afloat (and it seemed that she might be salvaged) until her forward 5-inch magazine exploded and blew a hole in her port side below water, and she sank just after midday on 9th August.

*Quincy* received the worst battering and was the first to sink. Caught in Japanese searchlights the enemy could see her guns trained fore and aft “for incredible minutes”, Ohmae recalled. “The turrets of enemy ships remained in their trained-in, secured positions . . . and we could actually distinguish the shapes of individuals running along the decks.” Here was an echo of the night action at Matapan seventeen months earlier, when the British Mediterranean Fleet met the Italian cruisers *Zara* and *Fiume* and “simultaneously with the great flash of the *Warspite*’s 15-inch guns

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8 Morison (Vol V, pp. 43-4) gives *Astoria* the credit for scoring two hits on *Chokai*, one on the staff chartroom, and one on a forward turret. He also says (p. 50) that *Quincy* hit *Chokai*’s staff chartroom and a forward turret. Ohmae mentions *Quincy*’s hits in “The Battle of Savo Island” (p. 1275), when he says: “From a group of three enemy ships the centre one bore out and down on us as if intending to ram. Though her entire hull from midships aft was enveloped in flames, her forward guns were firing with great spirit . . . It appears, from post-war accounts, that this was the U.S. heavy cruiser *Quincy*, and she certainly made an impression on the men of our force. At short range she fired an 8-inch shell which hit and exploded in the operations room of *Chokai*, just abaft the bridge, and knocked out our No. 1 turret.”
The Battle of Savo Island, 9th August 1942
the enemy ships were illuminated by searchlights, unprepared, with guns trained fore and aft and men running along their decks. The action lasted less than five minutes, by which time the Italian cruisers were shattered, blazing wrecks. So, too, was Quincy a blazing wreck within minutes—the flaring aircraft on its catapult illuminating her for the Japanese gunners. She fought back, but hopelessly, repeatedly “hit by large and small calibre shells”. It was noted that

below decks, scattered all over in the wake of exploded shells, were small granular fragments that seemed about the size of “Grape Nuts” (breakfast food) glowing and burning everything they came in contact with.

An officer who, when the ship was dying, went to the bridge

found a quartermaster spinning the wheel trying to turn the ship to starboard, who said that the captain had told him to beach the ship. He had no steering control. Just then the captain rose up about halfway, and collapsed dead. No others were moving in the pilot house, which was thick with bodies. Quincy capsized and sank between 2.35 a.m. and 2.40 a.m. on the 9th. Most of her survivors were picked up by the destroyer Ellet.

Vincennes followed Quincy to the bottom within about five minutes. The victim of many 8-inch and 5-inch shells, and at least two torpedoes, on fire and immobile, it was, at 2.30 a.m., decided to abandon her. Fifteen minutes later the ship heeled over and sank.

The two northern destroyers, Wilson and Helm, escaped the fate of their cruisers. Wilson did see the enemy and engaged in a brief duel, fruitless to both sides, with Chokai. Helm never saw a Japanese ship. She chased here and there after suspects (one was apparently Ralph Talbot) and finally made for the previously appointed rendezvous north-west of Savo, where she met Wilson, and found other destroyers in the area, including Selfridge and Mugford.

Soon after 2 a.m., the noise of battle having died astern, Chokai was steering northerly. Ohmae, at the chart table, was checking courses when gunfire was reported on the port bow. It was from the open sea beyond Savo, where Furutaka, Tenryu, and Yubari, ran foul of Ralph Talbot, still on her radar patrol. In a brief exchange between the three Japanese cruisers and the lone destroyer, Ralph Talbot suffered extensive damage and had 11 killed and 11 wounded. A concealing rain squall probably saved her from destruction. By now, Mikawa had decided to retire. Time—and the threat it held of daylight air attack, for Mikawa did not know that Fletcher had already withdrawn and was some 140 miles S.E. of Guadalcanal—was drawing dawn swiftly nearer, and it would be almost on them before the scattered Japanese ships could regain formation, work up to battle speed, and reach the transport groups. At 2.23 a.m. Mikawa gave the order to withdraw, and the ships formed line ahead on Chokai,
course N.W.:N., speed 30 knots. At sunrise the force was north of New Georgia, steaming swiftly over peaceful seas into a fine morning, while its commanders counted up the score.\(^8\)

**XIV**

At the time of Mikawa’s breaking off the action, neither Crutchley nor Turner had any idea of what had happened. The two met in Turner’s flagship, *McCawley*, about 10.30 p.m. on the 8th (Crutchley was accompanied by Gatacre) and Vandegrift arrived soon after eleven. The three commanders agreed that, with the loss of Fletcher’s air cover, the transports should leave at 7.30 next morning, “although Vandegrift was dismayed at the prospect of his 18,000 Marines being left with inadequate supplies and no naval support”.\(^9\) Crutchley asked Turner what he thought of the Intelligence report of the enemy force of three cruisers, three destroyers, and two seaplane tenders sighted east of Bougainville. Turner replied that it was his opinion that the force was destined for Rekata Bay, possibly from there to operate torpedo-carrying float-planes against our forces, and Crutchley concurred in this view.\(^1\)

It was 1.15 a.m. on the 9th when Crutchley rejoined *Australia*, and after 1.30 when the ship cleared the transport area. Because of the brief remaining period before the screening groups would have to leave day stations so as to be back with the transports by first light, Crutchley decided not to rejoin the southern group, and ordered *Australia* to patrol in the vicinity of Squadron X transports. At 1.50 they saw a flare dropped in the direction of the channel south-west of Savo Island. Almost at once they sighted a few rounds of tracer fire, and then immediately a burst of heavy surface fire, and “there began a general night action which, at 1.56, appeared to move to the right and to increase tremendously in intensity”. No enemy report was received, but Crutchley conjectured that the southern group had made contact with an enemy force, but “I felt confident that our five 8-inch cruisers and four destroyers then on patrol immediately inside Savo Island could effectively deal with any force likely to have been available to send against us”.

*Hobart*, patrolling with *San Juan* on a north-south line south-west of Tulagi, saw flares at 1.45 a.m., and three minutes later heard firing, and saw the glow of a burning ship on the horizon. There was heavy gunfire, and “two or three ships quickly set on fire. At 1.55 the original burning ship was seen to be *Canberra*. At 2.24 a.m. three burning ships, including *Canberra*, could be seen between W. by N. and N.W.”

Crutchley, in the absence of news, ordered *Australia* to patrol on courses

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\(^8\) From an analysis of the claims made by the individual ships, Mikawa’s staff estimated that they had sunk five heavy cruisers and four destroyers. Their own losses amounted to 35 killed and 51 wounded. *Chokai* was the heaviest sufferer both in damage and casualties—with 34 killed and 48 wounded. The Japanese fired 1,020 8-inch shells; 768 5-inch and 5.5-inch; over 1,000 small calibre; and 61 torpedoes.


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N.E. by E.—S.W. by W. about seven miles west of the transport group, to intercept any enemy which might get through the cruiser screen, and ordered all destroyers not in contact with the enemy to concentrate on him. Inability to decipher the position resulted in the destroyers concentrating instead in the previously arranged rendezvous north-west of Savo Island. Crutchley also, at 2.26, signalled the three screening groups asking if they were in action. Chicago replied “Were, but not now”, and San Juan said “No—the action appeared to be with a surface force between Florida and Savo Islands.” Through the remainder of the night scraps of information reached Crutchley, but at 5.47 a.m. he was still much in the dark when he signalled to the escort forces: “Situation obscure. Be prepared to give battle at dawn in vicinity transport groups”, in view of the possibility of enemy ships still being in the area and able to attack the transports. He knew that Canberra was burning and abandoning ship, and that Patterson was taking off the crew; that Chicago had been torpedoed but was effective; that Ralph Talbot was badly damaged near shore north-west of Savo Island; and that the destroyers were concentrated five miles north-west of Savo. He was quite unaware of the situation in the northern screening group. At 5.32 he ordered Comdesron 4 (in Selfridge) to investigate the state of Canberra and, in accordance with a signal he had received from Turner when the last named was told of Canberra’s plight, to sink the Australian cruiser if she was not, by 6.30 a.m. ready to join in the retirement plan.

Meanwhile in Canberra the commander, J. A. Walsh (himself badly wounded), who had been directing the fire-fighting amidships, had reached the bridge with assistance. He conferred with Getting (who was still conscious) and with Commander McMahon who had arrived to report the damage below. This was five or ten minutes after the start of the action. About this time, too, Surgeon Commander Downward arrived on the bridge. He found the captain lying on his back. The Commander was standing on the port side of the bridge. The Gunnery Officer’s body was on the port side. I spoke to the Captain but he refused any attention at all. He told me to look after the others.

Strenuous efforts were made to control the fires, using bucket chains in the absence of power and water pressure. Ammunition on deck was dumped overside, and magazines were flooded. Heavy rain2 helped those fighting the upper deck fires, but reports from between decks were not hopeful, and the list gradually increased to about fifteen degrees. About 3 a.m. Patterson was seen on the port bow. She went alongside (after waiting while some ammunition on the 4-inch gun deck exploded) at 3.25, by the bridge, port side. Hoses and portable pumps were passed to Canberra, who commenced transferring wounded—including Getting, now unconscious—to the destroyer. Twenty minutes later Patterson passed to

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2“...Midshipman I. M. Johnston and Sub-Lieutenant R. M. Dawborn to collect blankets, etc., from the sea cabins,” Mesley later recorded, “and they and several others produced coverings for the Captain, Commander, and the Gunnery Officer’s body.”
Canberra the order that if she was not ready to steam by 6.30 she was to be abandoned and destroyed. It was obvious that she could not be ready by then, and Walsh gave the order to return hoses and pumps to Patterson, and prepare to abandon ship. This abandonment was delayed, recorded Patterson’s captain, “because none of Canberra’s crew would leave the ship until all wounded were removed”.

At this stage there was a diversion. Mesley later described it:

Suddenly, about 4.30 a.m., the order was shouted from Patterson: “Out all lights!”, and almost immediately she passed the word that she would have to leave as she had sighted a hostile ship on the port quarter. The transfer of wounded was stopped, Patterson went ahead, parting or cutting the lines and letting the planks fall into the water. The parting words of her captain were “We’ll be back”, which were very cheering words indeed. Scarcely had she started to move when a ship resembling Chicago opened fire from our port quarter and all hands made a very hasty dive for cover. Everyone on the “B” gun deck took shelter behind the barbette but the expected explosions did not come, and it soon became evident that Patterson had drawn all the fire as she and the enemy disappeared ahead.

The suspected enemy was, in fact, Chicago. She and Patterson exchanged gunfire, and then the display of emergency signals established identification. At daylight, about 5.50 a.m., Chicago and Patterson returned to Canberra, with Blue, and the two destroyers completed removal of the cruiser’s wounded and survivors. In all 29 officers and 372 ratings were transferred to Patterson, and 22 officers and 321 ratings to Blue. Of the total number of 819 borne in Canberra, casualties were 193. Missing believed killed were 9 officers (of whom one was R.A.A.F. and one U.S. Navy) and 65 ratings (three R.A.A.F., two Royal Navy); died of wounds were one officer (Captain Getting, who died in U.S.S. Barnett on passage to Noumea and was buried at sea), and 9 ratings (one R.A.A.F.); and wounded, 10 officers (one R.N.), 96 ratings (2 R.A.A.F., 1 R.N. and 2 U.S.N.), and three civilian Canteen Staff. There were 40 officers and 586 ratings unwounded survivors. Of Canberra’s company, Commander Walker, Patterson’s captain, wrote to Admiral Crutchley four days after the action:

The Commanding Officer and entire ship’s company of the Patterson noted with admiration the calm, cheerful and courageous spirit displayed by officers and men of the Canberra. When Patterson left from alongside because of what was then believed to be an enemy ship close by, there were no outcries or entreaties—rather a cheery “Carry on Patterson, good luck!”—and prompt and efficient casting off of lines, brows, etc. Not a man stepped out of line. The Patterson feels privileged to have served so gallant a crew.

About 8 a.m. on the 9th, in position 9 degrees 10 minutes 40 seconds South, 159 degrees 52 minutes 15 seconds East, Canberra sank. Selfridge, in accordance with Crutchley’s instructions, attempted to sink her. She fired 263 5-inch shells and four torpedoes (one of which exploded under Canberra’s bows) but the tough old “John Brown’s body” of the Australian cruiser refused to sink. At this juncture U.S.S. Ellet appeared on

*Barnett, US attack transport (1943), 9,432 tons, one 5-in and three 3-in guns, 16 kts.*
the scene. Her Commanding Officer thought Selfridge was engaging a disabled Japanese cruiser, and joined in with an opening salvo at 5,000 yards. It was finally one of her torpedoes which administered the fatal blow to Canberra.4

Other destroyers, at this time, were away to the northward, rescuing from the water the survivors from Quincy and Vincennes. Astoria was still afloat but despite efforts by Bagley, Wilson and other destroyers to help her, she could not be saved, and finally sank just after noon. In all, in addition to their ship losses, American casualties in the Savo Island battle were 939 killed or died of wounds, 654 wounded.

Because the night's events delayed the unloading of transports, the withdrawal planned for 7.30 a.m. was postponed. Unloading, interrupted by an anticipated air attack (a coastwatcher's warning was received but no attack materialised) went on throughout the morning, and about 3.30 p.m. X Group transports and supply ships, escorted by Chicago, Mugford, Patterson, Ralph Talbot, Dewey, and the five destroyer minesweepers, proceeded eastward through Lengo Channel. At 7 p.m. they were followed by the ships of Y Group escorted by Australia, Hobart, San Juan, and the remaining ten destroyers. Course was south-easterly until the evening of 10th August, when it was altered to S.S.E., steering down between the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. At daybreak on the 11th the Y Group overtook the X detachment, and the two groups assumed cruising formation. That evening a section of eight transports was detached to Segond Channel, Espiritu Santo. The remainder of the force—less six Pacific Fleet destroyers which left to rejoin the carrier groups from which they had been detached for the WATCHTOWER operation—entered Noumea, New Caledonia, in the early afternoon of Thursday, 13th August 1942.

XV

At the time of the withdrawal of the transports and naval forces from the area, General Vandegrift reported:

We hold Tulagi, Gavutu, Makambo, Tanambogo, and have 5,000 men that area which was taken only after bitter fighting due restricted areas. Our casualties there estimated about 450. Japanese casualties 100 per cent running over 1,000. Also hold Kukum to Koli Point, Guadalcanal. Digging in to defend beaches. Patrolling to mop up garrison 300 troops and two thousand pioneers who withdrew to bush. Have disposed of a number and have suffered a few casualties. Airfield ready for fighters and dive bombers.

So far the heavy costs of the invasion had been paid by the Allied naval forces. In “Subsequent Deductions” made in February 1943, Admiral Crutchley attributed the high cost of achieving “our object, which was to prevent the enemy from reaching the transports”, to:

1. lack of experience—particularly at night fighting;
2. lack of alertness in almost every ship, probably due to fatigue of Captains, bridge and control officers.

4 Combat Narrative, Office of Naval Intelligence, US Navy.
(3) absence of Australia from the Australia group;
(4) failure of the majority of ships to receive the T.B.S. warning broadcast by Patterson.

Amplifying his remarks on lack of night-fighting experience, Crutchley commented that though before the war the Royal Navy paid much attention to night-fighting training, few, if any, ships had opportunity for such training during the war. The earlier night actions fought by the British naval forces on the whole proved successful, but now a generation of Commanding Officers has grown up without the benefit of peacetime training in a responsible position and many of the more junior officers with virtually no night training. I do not know how much the above remarks apply to the U.S. Navy, but I am of the opinion that they are suffering to some extent from the same disability.

He felt that the absence of Australia contributed to the Allied losses not solely because of the reduction in numerical strength, but because Australia has, during the war, seen much service. . . . The bridge officers in Australia are more experienced. I know that they were informed by their Captain of the objects of the movements of the group and that they were constantly alert. I am confident that Australia would have been quickly into action and that she would have given a good account of herself. Whereas Canberra, leading the line by order of Chicago (the officer-in-charge of the group), was a recently commissioned ship commanded by a Captain who had been there less than two months.

Farncomb, captain of Australia, spoke of the fatigue induced by prolonged alertness, and the necessity to find means of obviating this. In his "Letter of Proceedings" dated 12th August 1942, he wrote:

The prolonged periods spent at action stations, day and night, with very little rest, coupled with a mental strain, first, during the approach, when the reception we were likely to meet could not be gauged, and subsequently, during the periods of waiting for enemy air attacks and submarine and surface ship attacks, were calculated at times to produce a feeling of lassitude, both mental and physical. Of this I can give personal testimony. . . . I feel that in operations of this sort, some relief must be given from the continuous state of alertness required, either by providing extra complement to enable key officers and ratings to be in watches during periods of a high degree of readiness, or by relieving ships temporarily after a couple of days.

Remarking that fatigue must reduce efficiency to danger point if a "fresh" enemy were met, Farncomb warned:

Continuous alertness of a high order is essential in operations near enemy bases and therefore the often-forgotten adage that "Men fight, not ships", should not, once more, be forgotten.

It was an echo of Cunningham's letter to the Admiralty at the Battle of Crete in May 1941, "that effect of recent operations is cumulative. . . . It is inadvisable to drive men beyond a certain point"; and of Doorman's warning to Helfrich on the eve of the Battle of the Java Sea in February 1942: "This day the personnel reached the limit of endurance; tomorrow, the limit will be exceeded."

* Royal Australian Navy, 1939-1942, p. 608.
A Board of Inquiry into the loss of Canberra was held in Sydney during August and September 1942. Summarised, its main findings were that Canberra was not in a proper state of readiness in that guns were not loaded, and that the complete surprise achieved by the enemy, coupled with his instant effective action, resulted in Canberra's failure to engage; that the damage she suffered was caused by gunfire and that she was not torpedomed; that the flooding of magazines probably contributed to the list and subsequent loss of the ship; that the general behaviour of the ship's company was satisfactory, and that “there is no doubt that frequent changes in complement even in the lower ratings may seriously affect the efficiency of the Damage Control and Fire and Repair parties, and such changes should be kept to a minimum”.

Comment was made in the findings on the apparent overlooking of the possibility that the aircraft observed overhead for more than an hour before the attack were enemy. That this was generally overlooked is the more remarkable in that precisely similar reconnaissance by precisely similar aircraft was carried out before the Japanese raids on Sydney and Diego Suarez little more than two months earlier. And both Canberra and Chicago had first-hand experience of the reconnaissance over Sydney.

In a letter to the Naval Board in November 1942, Admiral Crutchley expressed disagreement with the Board of Inquiry's finding that Canberra was not torpedomed. He remarked that he had “read all the evidence, both that given at the inquiries and that written by survivors who were not examined. I have studied a great deal of information in the various reports of ships which have been torpedoed. I have discussed the matter at great length with the Squadron Engineer Officer.” Pointing out that in something like two minutes from the time she was first struck, Canberra was powerless with a list of about seven degrees to starboard while nearly all the shell damage was caused by fire from her port side, he went on to advance detailed reasons for his conclusion that the initial list of about seven degrees to starboard, and the sudden loss of all power, was “exactly what should have been expected from a torpedo hit which had made a large breach in the starboard side in the vicinity of 127 bulkhead. This breach would immediately flood both boiler rooms and account for loss of steam and death of ratings.” With regard to the Board's comments that frequent changes in complement could affect efficiency, he remarked in the same letter: “To our cost we all know this.” The matter of such changes was one that concerned those in the ships, and writing at the same time to the First Naval Member, Admiral Royle, Crutchley regretted that he had “sprung another [letter] on you about drafting”, but “I felt I ought to as I have had a lot to do with it from the sea and depot ends this war. An instance is Hobart sailed from Sydney ten days ago; I have since had her at sea for eight days, and today there are 17 changes.”

6 The Board, under the presidency of Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould, had as members: Captain A. H. Spurgeon, A/Captain W. L. G. Adams, RN; A/Captain J. M. Armstrong; Engineer Captain L. J. P. Carr; Paymaster-Commander J. O'Reilly.

Throughout 9th August, while the Allied ships at Guadalcanal continued unloading so as to leave, before their departure that evening, as much nourishment as possible for the Marines on shore, Mikawa's force sped north-westwards towards its bases. At 10 a.m., when just south of Bougainville, Mikawa detached the four ships of the 6th Cruiser Division for Kavieng, while Chokai, with Tenryu, Yubari and Yunagi, made for Rabaul. Both forces went to the east of Bougainville. The 6th Cruiser Division continued north-westerly, well to the north-eastward of New Ireland. Around 9 a.m. on the 10th, some 150 miles due east of Kavieng, course was altered to west for their destination. A few minutes later—about the time Mikawa's force entered Rabaul—the small American submarine S 44, based on Brisbane, sighted the 6th Cruiser Division, attacked from a range of 700 yards, and torpedoed Kako, which sank within five minutes with the loss of 34 killed. (The Japanese submarines ordered to the Guadalcanal area—I 121, I 122, I 123, and RO 33—arrived too late to be of any service, on 9th, 10th, and 11th of August.)

On his arrival at Rabaul, Mikawa received an enthusiastic message of congratulations from Yamamoto. But subsequently the withdrawal without destroying the Allied transports was bitterly criticised. Ohmae's reasons for "our early retirement" (which Mikawa later said were those that influenced him at the time) were "based in part on the Japanese Navy's 'decisive battle' doctrine that destruction of the enemy fleet brings an automatic constriction of his command of the sea". That air power invalidated this doctrine was not at this time appreciated by the Japanese. Another reason behind Mikawa's decision to retire was the fact that with the lack of a unified command of air and surface forces "we in the Eighth Fleet ships could simply not expect of our land-based planes the degree of cooperation required to cover us in a dawn retirement". With the benefit of hindsight, Ohmae saw two grievous mistakes of the Japanese Navy at the time of the Guadalcanal campaign: the attempt to conduct major operations simultaneously at Milne Bay and in the Solomons, and the premature retirement from the battle of Savo Island. I played a significant part in each of these errors. Both were a product of undue reliance on the unfounded assurances of our Army [that it would not be difficult to drive out whatever meagre American forces might be delivered to Guadalcanal] and of a general contempt for the capabilities of the enemy. Thus lay open the road to Tokyo.

It was the denial of the southern Solomons and of the Guadalcanal airfield to the Japanese which placed the feet of the Allies firmly on the road to Tokyo. Their dislodgment at this juncture should have been the paramount concern of the Japanese; but that other horn of the Japanese dilemma—Port Moresby and its threat to Rabaul—was also demanding, and the enemy strove to meet both demands simultaneously. Thus while

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8 S 44, US submarine (1925), 850 tons, one 4-in gun, four 21-in torpedo tubes, 14½ kts. Sunk off Kurile Is, 7 Dec 1943.
8 I 121, I 122, I 123, Japanese submarines (1926-27), 1,142 tons, one 5.5-in gun, 14½ kts. I 122 sunk off west coast of Japan, 10 Jun 1945; I 123 sunk off Guadalcanal, 29 Aug 1942.
inadequate preparations for the ejection of the Marines from the southern Solomons were put in train, the invasion of New Guinea at Buna and Milne Bay continued. On 12th August the convoy, carrying the main Nankai Detachment to Buna, which had sailed from Rabaul on the 6th and been recalled when news of the Solomons invasion was received, again left Rabaul, escorted by Tatsuta, Yuzuki, Yunagi, and submarine chasers. It entered Buna anchorage on the 13th, and landed its men and supplies without loss, despite Allied air attacks on the anchorage. Four days later another convoy of three transports, carrying the South Seas Detachment, and air base material of the 25th Air Flotilla, left Rabaul similarly escorted. It was covered against air attack by a Japanese air raid on Moresby (the 78th) by 24 heavy bombers. They struck at the Seven Mile airfield, and destroyed 5 Allied aircraft and badly damaged 11, and demolished the control tower and operations hut. The convoy reached Buna on the 18th, and was followed next day by one of two transports and escorts.