

Solomon Islands Naval Battles

The Solomon Islands became the focus of attention of allied planners in late June 1942. When reports reached strategic planners that the Japanese were constructing an airfield on Guadalcanal, the most south easterly of the Solomons chain, they decided to forestall this by staging an invasion. An airfield at this location would give air supremacy across the sea lanes between the US west coast and Australasia to whoever possessed it. With the defeat of the Imperial Japanese Navy at Midway in early June, where they lost four carriers, the US Navy and Marines felt they could seize the airfield with a good chance of success, before it became operational. Such an operation would demonstrate that the US was at last taking the offensive after an eight month rampage by Japanese forces.

On August 7 1942 units of the 1st Marine division led by General Vandergift landed on Guadalcanal and nearby Tulagi Is. completely surprising the Japanese defenders. The still incomplete airfield was quickly secured and later renamed Henderson field in honor of Major Lofton Henderson, the Marine dive bomber squadron leader who had been killed in action in the Battle of Midway the previous June. The Marines quickly completed the airfield using captured construction equipment abandoned by the Japanese and the first Dauntless dive bombers and Wildcat fighters arrived just 13 days later to become the core of what would be known as the 'Cactus Air Force' after the allied codename for Guadalcanal. This first amphibious assault by the Marines was a somewhat chaotic affair compared to later operations, so it was fortunate that they only encountered light opposition. A rehearsal in Fiji the previous month was a complete shambles and reflected the fact that the 1st Marine division was expected to have six more months of training in the South Pacific theatre before being committed to combat. The urgency of the situation in the Solomons had forced a drastic change in plans.

On the evening of August 8th Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher commanding Task Force 61 which was covering the landings was forced to withdraw his three carriers because land based enemy planes had inflicted heavy losses on his aircraft and he could not risk his precious flat tops. Task Force 61 was comprised of USS Enterprise, Saratoga, and Wasp. Yorktown was lost at Midway in June, Lexington was lost in the Coral Sea battle in May, the Langley, the Navy's very first carrier, had been lost during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies back in February, the Hornet was in Pearl harbor having radar fitted, and the Essex, the first of the new fleet carriers, had not yet been commissioned. The withdrawal of TF 61 alarmed Admiral Turner who was in charge of the amphibious force and he had to inform Gen Vandergift he would have to temporarily withdraw his transports under cover of darkness even though they had not yet disembarked all of his troops and equipment. However the situation was more acute than either commander realized.

Battle of Savo Island

On the night of August 8 Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa led a force of seven cruisers and a destroyer into the channel between Guadalcanal and Savo Island and inflicted a stunning defeat on the Allied cruiser force screening the landings. The 'Battle of Savo Island', as this action is known, demonstrated the superiority of Japanese night fighting abilities at this stage of the war and resulted in the loss of the cruisers HMAS Canberra, USS Vincennes, Quincy and Astoria along with 1,077 crew. Moderate damage was inflicted on three of the Japanese cruisers. The Allied force had been caught somewhat flat footed as commander of the Allied cruiser force, British Rear Admiral Crutchley was in conference with Turner and Vandergift discussing the withdrawal of the amphibious force and had left no one in overall command of the allied cruisers. Only five of his force of eight cruisers were in patrol positions in two groups north and south of Savo Island, the other two were patrolling the eastern approaches and he had detached his flagship Australia to confer with Turner and Vandergift. The two western groups were surprised by Mikawa's force when searchlights suddenly stabbed out in the darkness and the allied ships were illuminated by

flares exposing them to withering fire from the Japanese force. Both groups of allied cruisers were soon reduced to flaming wrecks. Although the allied ships were equipped with radar these were early models and were not very effective in the waters between Guadalcanal and Savo Is and the crews were still not familiar with the new technology.

The victims of the Battle of Savo Island were the first of dozens to litter the seabed between Savo Island, Tulagi and Guadalcanal. The area was soon dubbed Ironbottom Sound became the graveyard of the many victims of the naval battles around Guadalcanal in 1942-43. Before the war it was called Sealark Sound. The looming silhouette of the volcanic island Savo formed the backdrop to all the major surface actions fought in the waters north of Guadalcanal. It lies to the north east of Ironbottom sound and its familiar outline can be seen in many photographs taken at the time of the six month campaign and seems to provide a sinister backdrop for the violent events that took place there.

Tokyo Express

The Japanese high command was determined to dislodge the Marines' foothold on Guadalcanal and troops were dispatched to do this. They were landed and supplied in nightly runs by destroyers and transports led by Admiral Raizo Tanaka in an operation which soon became known as the Tokyo Express. It operated for the entire six months of the campaign and its commander was soon dubbed 'Tenacious Tanaka' because of his skill at running the operation and his determination to see the mission accomplished. The operation soon developed a pattern with the operation commencing from the major bastion at Rabaul during daylight hours and a high speed run to unload supplies under cover of darkness and to be clear of Ironbottom sound by daylight in order to avoid the attention of the Cactus Air Force. The operation ran in reverse during the later months of the campaign when the Japanese were withdrawing their defeated and starving troops.

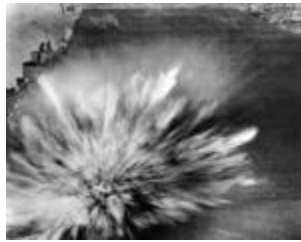
The Slot

As Japanese reinforcements approached Guadalcanal from their bases at Rabaul and New Ireland they had to run the gauntlet known as 'The Slot' a narrow stretch of water between two parallel island chains. The Slot stretched about 300 miles between the two major islands of the Solomons chain, Bougainville to the North West and Guadalcanal to the South East. Its relatively confined waters exposed ships traversing it to aerial attack with little maneuvering room and observation from Coastwatchers. Time and again throughout the six month campaign General Vandergrift and his Marines received early warning of the approach of Japanese air strikes and seaborne reinforcements by a dedicated group of observers known as Coastwatchers. The Coastwatchers were set up by the Australian Navy when they recruited former plantation owners, colonial officials and locals to stay behind as the Japanese occupied the various island groups north of Australia. They were equipped with the bulky tele-radios of that time and reported on enemy movements, gathered intelligence and rescued downed airmen and shipwrecked sailors. Perhaps the most famous of these was the future John F. Kennedy and his crew who were rescued by Coastwatchers when PT 109 was run down by a Japanese destroyer in the dark. Their early warnings saved the bacon of the 'Cactus Air Force' on many an occasion and they could have no greater tribute paid to them than that from Admiral William Halsey commander in chief of the South Pacific when he said: "The Coastwatchers saved Guadalcanal, and Guadalcanal saved the Pacific".

Battle of the Eastern Solomons

Admiral Yamamoto, still smarting from the defeat at Midway, was determined to engage the American carrier force and inflict a defeat, saw an opportunity on August 23 when the Combined Fleet sallied from Truk lagoon to provide distant cover for one of Admiral Tanaka's supply runs. The resulting two day carrier action established the reputation of the Enterprise as a lucky ship. This action became known as the 'Battle of the Eastern Solomons' where

the Enterprise received several hits from a strike force dispatched by Shokaku and Zuikaku which disabled her steering gear and put an elevator out of action. Fortunately a second strike missed her by a few miles and the Enterprise was able to limp away and fight another day. The bulk of the American strike was concentrated on the light carrier Ryujo which was soon dispatched and sunk. The attacks on Shokaku and Zuikaku were largely ineffective. The Battle of the Eastern Solomons is generally regarded as a case of missed opportunities by both sides. However the Japanese lost 75 planes and their highly trained crews which could not be easily replaced to the American loss of 25 aircraft, a loss rate that could not be sustained. Admiral Tanaka was forced to call off his supply run when his flagship the cruiser Juntsu was badly damaged and one of his destroyers and a transport were sunk by aircraft from the 'Cactus Air Force'.



Bomb dropped by Japanese pilot Kazumi Horie exploding on the flight deck of USS Enterprise during Battle of the Eastern Solomons, 24 Aug 1942

September 15 the Wasp became the third major US carrier to be lost in the Pacific theatre in 1942 when she was sunk by an enemy submarine south east of San Cristobal Island. The Wasp was part of a task force escorting a convoy bringing reinforcements to Guadalcanal when the submarine I 19 launched a spread of four torpedoes. Two of these struck the Wasp causing explosions and gasoline fires which soon became uncontrollable. The crew was eventually evacuated and the Wasp was abandoned and sank seven hours later. By extraordinary chance, I 19's other two torpedoes travelled on for several thousand metres, one striking the battleship North Carolina and the other hitting the destroyer O'Brien which eventually sank.

Battle of Cape Esperance

Lookouts on the cruiser Helena reported "Ships visible to the naked eye" to which an exasperated radar operator exclaimed "What are we going to do, board them!" This was the tense situation on the night of October 11 which preceded the clash which became known as the 'Battle of Cape Esperance'. The advantage of surprise was quickly being squandered as Admiral Scott led his force of four cruisers and six destroyers to intercept an opposing force of three heavy cruisers and two destroyers led by Admiral Goto in a clash that became known as the Battle of Cape Esperance. Scott had led the unengaged eastern cruiser group in the Battle of Savo Island and was eager to reverse that humiliation. His line ahead formation had become disorganized when he turned to intercept the approaching Japanese formation and he held his fire for fear of hitting his own destroyer screen, hence the tense verbal exchanges among his crews. Scott was fortuitously in the position of crossing Goto's 'T', who was still unaware of the enemy's presence, a reversal of the situation at Savo Is. Helena's captain finally opened fire followed by the rest of the cruisers and quickly took out the lead Japanese cruiser Aoba, mortally wounding Admiral Goto in the process. At one point the American force had the Japanese on the run, but the undamaged Kinugasa rounded on her pursuers launched a torpedo spread on Helena and Boise then proceeded to disable the Boise with shellfire. Both forces retired with the Japanese losses being one cruiser and three destroyers including two dispatched the next day and the American side lost the destroyer Duncan with the Boise being heavily damaged. Psychologically it was an American victory as they had proved they could match the Japanese at night fighting but had still been unable to prevent the Tokyo Express from unloading its cargo of artillery and troop reinforcements.

The Marines at Henderson Field suffered the worst bombardment of the campaign on the night of October 13-14 when the battleships Haruna and Kongo subjected them to several hours of sustained 14 inch shell fire. During this

sustained attack Admiral Tanaka's Tokyo Express landed 4,500 men, the largest troop contingent of the campaign. This was part of a build-up for a third attempt to dislodge the Marines. The Japanese consistently underestimated the size of the American force holding the island and were never able to commit and supply a large enough force to achieve victory. Despite this punishing bombardment, which destroyed over 40 aircraft, survivors of the 'Cactus Air Force' were back in action the next morning and managed to sink three of the retiring transports.

Battle of Santa Cruz

On October 26 the carrier fleets of both sides again clashed in the 'Battle of Santa Cruz'. Both sides had provided carrier support for respective attempts to supply their forces on Guadalcanal. Each side found the other's carriers almost simultaneously and launched air strikes against each other. The Enterprise continued its lucky streak by running into a rain squall during the initial attack but sustained damage in later strikes. The Hornet was not so lucky and was soon hit by bombs and torpedoes. Salvage attempts proved futile and she soon sank becoming the major American loss of the battle. The battleship South Dakota was also superficially damaged when she took a bomb hit on 'A' turret which showered the bridge with shrapnel, a piece of which hit Captain Gatch narrowly missing his jugular vein. The Japanese suffered no losses but the fleet carrier Zuikaku, the light carrier Zuiho and the heavy cruiser Chikuma were all put out of action and had to retire to Truk lagoon for repairs. Aircraft losses were 99 Japanese and 81 American. The Battle of Santa Cruz left the Americans with the damaged Enterprise as the only operational fleet carrier in the entire Pacific theatre! The Wasp had been torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine back in September and the Saratoga had hit a mine a week after the Battle of the Eastern Solomons and been forced to retire to the US west coast for repairs.



Damage to Hornet's smokestack and signal bridge at Battle of Santa Cruz Islands, 26 Oct 1942

The struggle for supremacy in the waters around Guadalcanal reached a climax in mid November as both sides shaped up for a knockout punch. According to one US commander the action on the night of November 12-13 quickly degenerated into a 'bar-room brawl after the lights had been shot out'. This is probably an accurate analogy of how the action played out. The Japanese plan was for Admiral Abe to lead the battleships Hiei and Kirishima together with the light cruiser Nagara and six destroyers to deliver a heavy bombardment to Henderson Field similar to that in October while the Tokyo Express dashed down the Slot to land much needed reinforcements and supplies to the hard pressed ground forces. On this occasion Abe's force, deployed in arrow formation, ran into a force of five cruisers and eight destroyers steaming in line ahead led by Admiral Callaghan who had been alerted to the Japanese presence. There was no time for a coordinated battle plan and Callaghan, surrounded by the Abe's ships, was forced to give the less than satisfactory order for odd ships to fire to starboard and even ships to fire to port.

With searchlights and flares lighting up the darkness the battle quickly became a brawl with ships engaging each other at will. At one point American destroyers riddled the upper works of the battleship Hiei with 5 inch shell and

machine gun fire at point blank range while she was unable to respond effectively because her 14 inch guns could not be depressed low enough. Morning found the waters of Ironbottom sound littered with the flotsam of battle the final toll being two cruisers and four destroyers from the American side and two Japanese destroyers lost. The Hiei was dispatched the next day by the Cactus Air Force when she was found sailing in circles near Savo Is. Round one of the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal had gone to the Japanese.



South Dakota and a Japanese torpedo plane 'Kate', Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, 26 Oct 1942

During the night action of November 12-13 Rear Admiral Scott and Rear Admiral Callaghan, two American Admirals perished. Admiral Scott was killed on the bridge of the Atlanta along with most of the ship's command when she inadvertently sailed into crossfire from San Francisco during the confused battle. Admiral Callaghan was killed when the bridge of San Francisco was riddled with shellfire a few minutes later as she traded blows with the Hiei. So in addition to their heavy losses the Americans lost their first and second commanding officers. On the other hand the Japanese had to call off their planned bombardment of Henderson Field and Tanaka's Tokyo Express was forced to turn back to base.

A tragic aftermath to this night action took place the next morning when the badly damaged cruiser Juneau was torpedoed and sunk by a submarine taking with her the five Sullivan brothers. Joseph, Francis, Albert, and Madison went down with the Juneau. Their brother George died in a life raft while awaiting rescue. The five brothers had overcome official reluctance and served together on the same ship amid much publicity when they had enlisted. Official policy was changed after this tragedy to prevent members of a family from serving together on the same ship.

When Admiral Halsey heard of the deaths of Admirals Callaghan and Scott during the night action of November 12-13, he realized he had nothing to counter the next Japanese move except his two big battlewagons which were acting as escorts to his last operational carrier, Enterprise. Without hesitation he dispatched the battleships Washington and South Dakota the following night to the waters around Guadalcanal to protect Henderson Field from the Japanese Navy. Admiral Lee, in charge of Washington and South Dakota accepted his orders with glee and was eager to show what his well rehearsed crews could do with their 16 inch guns. Unlike Callaghan and Scott he was well versed in the use of radar and his ships were equipped with the new SG type. Meanwhile Admiral Tanaka was to attempt once again to land his troops supported by Admiral Kondo leading a force centered on the battleship Kirishima the survivor of the Nov 13 battle. Kondo knew he would meet some opposition but grossly underestimated the size of the force steaming to meet him, figuring the largest ships he would face would be heavy cruisers.

When darkness fell, Lee's ships entered Ironbottom sound in line ahead with four destroyers leading his two battlewagons. First blood was drawn by the Japanese when the cruiser Nagara sank the two leading American destroyers Preston and Walke and the other two were forced to withdraw. Lee had now lost his destroyer screen but their sacrifice had not been in vain, as they had screened the battlewagons from enemy torpedoes. At this critical moment South Dakota lost electrical power to its radar screens and fire control equipment, a problem which occurred intermittently throughout the battle. South Dakota was now out of position and soon came under heavy fire from Kondo's main force causing severe damage to her upper works. She lost communication and was forced to retire. Washington, which had remained undetected, now took on the enemy sending salvo after salvo of 16 inch shells into the Kirishima. She took nine major hits including some below the waterline and was reduced to a flaming

wreck. Washington managed to avoid several spreads of torpedoes fired by destroyers before retiring. This was one of the last battleship surface actions and demonstrated that the Kongo class WWI battleships with their 14 inch guns, which had originally been built as battlecruisers but were modified with increased armour and engines in the 1930's and re-classified 'Fast Battleships', were no match for the state of the art Washington and South Dakota with their radar and 16 inch guns. Tanaka was forced into the drastic action of beaching his transports in order to deliver their now desperately needed supplies as they probably would have been sunk by air attack the next day.

On the night of November 30 a remarkable action took place when destroyers of Admiral Tanaka's Tokyo Express devastated an American cruiser force with their Long Lance torpedoes. Tanaka's force of nine destroyers were unloading supplies packed in drums when they were surprised by a superior force of four heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and six destroyers equipped with the new SG radar. The experienced Tanaka with his well trained crews managed to reverse the situation by avoiding all the American torpedoes before launching a huge spread of his own Long Lance torpedoes. Compared to the American Mark XV torpedo the Long Lance was faster, had a larger warhead, had more than three times the range and most importantly usually exploded on impact unlike the high number of duds in the American inventory. These had a devastating effect on the cruisers Pensacola, New Orleans, Minneapolis and Northampton which were all ripped open. Northampton finally sank but frantic efforts by their crews managed to save the other three. One of the reasons cited for the poor performance of the Americans at what is known as Battle of Tassafaronga was that their force had been cobbled together from the remnants of earlier units and had never worked together. This action was Admiral Tanaka's finest hour.

On January 29-30 1943 the last major naval of the Guadalcanal took place and resulted in the loss of the heavy cruiser USS Chicago. The Chicago, just returned to duty following repairs after the Battle of Savo Island six months before, was part of a task force (TF18) that was to conduct a sweep of 'The Slot' to protect a convoy which was delivering reinforcements to Guadalcanal. Halsey was replacing the battle weary and weakened troops of Gen Vandergrift's hard pressed 1st Marine division who had been in continuous action since the initial landings on Aug 8 with fresh troops from the 2nd Marine division and Army units. It was feared the Japanese were building up their forces for a new push. In fact the Japanese High Command had taken the decision to evacuate Guadalcanal because of the difficulties of supplying their troops and to set up a new defense on New Georgia Island, the next group up the Solomon Island ladder. Reconnaissance aircraft soon located TF 18 near Rennell Island SE of Guadalcanal on the evening of the 29th and it was soon under attack from a force of torpedo carrying Betty bombers. Chicago took two hits and was taken in a slow tow in the pitch darkness by Louisville while the rest of TF 18 withdrew. The next morning the Japanese renewed their attacks and put four more torpedoes into Chicago which sank her shortly afterward and scored one hit on the destroyer La Vallette. With Japanese air assets occupied with this battle Halsey's convoy was able to proceed to Guadalcanal and achieved its mission unmolested. For their part the withdrawal of TF 18 enabled the last runs of the Tokyo Express to take place over three nights in Feb 1943 when 13000 emaciated survivors were evacuated from a force of 36000 that had attempted to retake Henderson Field over the previous six months.



Chicago low in the water on 30 Jan 1943, after she had been torpedoed by Japanese aircraft during the Battle of Rennell Island

Battle of the Bismarck Sea

At the same time as the Guadalcanal campaign was raging, an equally bitter series of battles known as the 'Battle of the Bismarck Sea' was occurring on the island of New Guinea. In early March, a convoy set out from Rabaul to land much-needed reinforcements in the Buna - Gona area. It was composed of eight transports escorted by eight destroyers, and screened by an inadequate light combat air patrol. Unbeknownst to the Japanese, the American air force had been experimenting with a new aerial tactic called skip-bombing, wherein the attacking airplane drops a bomb with a long-delay fuse close to the surface and lets it skip into the side of the target ship. This was the first occasion in which the Americans would use this new tactic. As soon as the Japanese came under the radius of American airpower, the convoy was attacked relentlessly. The first day's attack (by high altitude B-17s) sank two transports and damaged a third. Two destroyers were tasked with rescuing the survivors and making a high speed run to New Guinea to deposit them. This they did, and returned to the plodding convoy before dawn the next day. March 4 proved to be a disaster for the Japanese. Coming within range of American and Australian medium bombers, the convoy was savaged by skip-bombing and strafing. By noon, all six remaining transports and four of the destroyers were sinking or sunk. The remaining four destroyers recovered what few survivors they could and fled north to Rabaul. After this, the Japanese would never again attempt to run slow transports into the face of American airpower.



Japanese ship burning after being attacked by the US 5th Air Force, Battle of Bismarck Sea, 4 Mar 1943

Battle of Kula Gulf

On the night of July 5th, an American cruiser and destroyer task force was notified of the approach of a Japanese destroyer reinforcement group outbound from Buin. The Americans reversed course and moved to meet them off of Kolombangara. First contact was made at 0106 by Japanese radar aboard Niizuki. The Americans enjoyed an advantage in terms of gunfire, and the Japanese had several ships loaded with combat troops, but as usual the Japanese advantage in torpedoes and tactics made up the difference.

The Americans maintained a line-ahead formation and began firing at 0157. They quickly demolished Niizuki, which drew fire from every American cruiser. Japanese torpedoes were already in the water, however, and at 0203 they hit Helena, which lost her bow back to the No. 2 turret, and then took another two hits which sank her. Meanwhile, the Japanese had several vessels damaged by gunfire, and Nagatsuki had run aground. Both forces began a general retirement.

However, both sides still had destroyers in the area attempting to rescue survivors; one Japanese and two American. Around 0500 Amagiri and Nicholas exchanged torpedoes and then gunfire. Amagiri was hit and retired, leaving Niizuki's survivors to their fate. The Americans, by contrast succeeded in rescuing many of Helena's survivors. The final casualty was Nagatsuki; abandoned by her crew in the morning after they failed to get her afloat, she was bombed into a sinking state by US planes.

The losses were about even for both sides. Given the disadvantages the Japanese had labored under, the Americans really ought to have done better. This battle is intriguing, too, for the fact that it was the Japanese who used their search radar effectively. However, American radar gunfire control (which the Japanese still did not have) had allowed them to inflict rapid damage to the opposing force.

Battle of Vella Gulf

Yet another Japanese destroyer reinforcement group, this time headed for Kolombangara, was intercepted by an American destroyer force near Vella LaVella. The Americans used the black backdrop of Kolombangara to hide their ships. They also avoided using their guns until their torpedoes were in the water. By the time Shigure, which was at the tail end of the Japanese column (with [Tameichi Hara](#) aboard) spotted the Americans at 2344, the American fish were about a minute away from their targets. As Shigure began launching an eight-fish salvo, the three lead Japanese destroyers were hit within moments of each other. Shigure, too, was hit by a dud torpedo as she turned away. The fish punched a hole in her rudder.

The Americans then closed in to finish the job with gunfire. Practically no resistance came from the crippled Japanese DDs. Shigure had no choice but to run for her life. In all, the Japanese had lost three ships and over 1,200 men. The Americans suffered not a single casualty.

This battle is important because for the first time American destroyers had demonstrated that, given the opportunity, they could meet and best their opposite numbers. By being relieved of their normal duties of screening cruisers, and the linear tactics that role had thus far imposed, the American DDs were able to employ innovative torpedo tactics which had worked beautifully. The Japanese Navy had been served notice that its reign of nighttime torpedo supremacy was at an end.

Battle off Horaniu

By mid-July, the situation on Kolombangara was such that the Japanese were making every effort to remove their troops. A Japanese barge convoy, escorted by destroyers, was sent out on the 17th to attempt the mission. An American destroyer force had come north that night to intercept and destroy the barges.

Both forces spotted each other at 0029 on the 18th. The Japanese launched torpedoes at very long range, but the Americans had formed up line abreast and thus combed their wakes. After another series of maneuvers, however, the two destroyer forces found themselves line abreast and within long gunfire range. Both groups hammered away at each other, but were generally ineffective. At around 0100 the Isokaze's radar (erroneously) detected another American force closing from the south, at which point the Japanese retired. In the interim, though, most of the Japanese barges had scattered, leaving only two for the Americans to find and sink.

Neither side had been particularly impressive this night. The only redeeming feature for the Americans was the fact that with radar controlled gunfire they had at least scored more near-misses and straddles than their enemy. The other important thing to note is that, once again, the Americans had demonstrated that their destroyers (at least) were beginning to learn how to take the sting out of Japanese torpedo tactics.

Battle of Vella Lavella

In October, the Japanese ran another /destroyer barge force towards Vella Lavella to try and rescue the 600-some soldiers stranded there. An American destroyer group was dispatched to block this movement. For once, the Japanese would enjoy a numerical advantage as they outnumbered the American destroyers nine to six, although

three of their DDs also carried troops. Further, the American commander (Captain Walker) decided not to join his two groups of three destroyers before approaching the likely scene of battle. Thus he would bring his three 'tin cans' up against a much superior force.

The Japanese actually spotted the Americans visually a minute before American radar returned the favor, but the Japanese were unsure of their sighting for another several minutes. As luck would have it, their course and speed were such that they stood a good chance of crossing the American 'T'. However, the Japanese commander then engaged his squadron in a complex series of evolutions which wasted the initial advantage. At 2256, both columns opened up on each other simultaneously.

The Americans lost one ship (Chevalier) crippled almost immediately to a torpedo, and the next destroyer in line (O'Bannon) then proceeded to ram her sister. However, American gunfire was simultaneously tearing Yugumo apart. After a brief exchange of further gunnery between Selfridge, Shigure and Samidare, the Japanese retreated the way they came, apparently fearing larger American forces were approaching the area. The Japanese barges, however, accomplished their mission and rescued all the remaining Japanese troops on the island. All in all, not an impressive showing for the Americans, who should have waited to join forces before attacking the Japanese.

Battle of Empress Augusta Bay

On November 1, 1943, the Americans landed a large amphibious force on the important island of Bougainville. They expected a vigorous response from the Japanese, and they got one. Admiral Sentaro Omori sortied from Rabaul at once with a powerful surface force of two heavy and two light cruisers, and six destroyers. The Americans, having sent most of their assault transports out of the danger zone before nightfall, awaited the Japanese with four light cruisers and eight destroyers. The advantage in both gunfire and torpedoes clearly lay with the Japanese.

Fortunately for the Americans, the Japanese force was a 'pick-up' team which hadn't practiced together, and Omori tried playing a game that was a little over his head. Confused by conflicting reports he was receiving from his scout planes as to the composition of the American force to his south, he executed a series of 180-degree turns (in pitch blackness) which were designed to give his aircraft more time to bring him information. Instead, all they did was throw his squadron into disarray, leaving his screening force far out of position, just as the Americans arrived on the scene. The Americans, coming upon the Japanese screen, launched torpedoes first, and then opened with guns. The Japanese screening force, upon spotting American destroyers, tried desperately to evade the torps they knew to be in the water, and ended up either colliding with each other or suffering near-misses. Sendai nearly hit Shigure, and Samidare sideswiped Shiratsuyu, staving in her hull and putting her out of the fight. Sendai was then buried in 6-inch gunfire.

Omori tried bringing his main body into the battle. This only succeeded in causing further collisions, as Myoko tore Hatsukaze's bow off, and Haguro nearly hit two other destroyers. A brief, inconclusive fight followed between the two Japanese heavies and the four American lights. Although the Japanese launched a large salvo of torpedoes, they were ineffective. The Americans achieved several gunfire straddles, but failed to hit their targets. At 0229 Omori ordered a general withdrawal. The Americans found the hapless Hatsukaze (Myoko was still wearing her bow when she returned to Rabaul) and sank her with gunfire.

The Japanese had clearly lost this fight, failing to bring their heavy units to bear conclusively, and wiping out most of their own screening destroyers through their own ill-considered maneuvers. The invasion of Bougainville wouldn't be stopped this night.



Montpelier firing her guns during the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay, night of 1-2 Nov 1943

Carrier Raid on Rabaul

Rabaul was the stronghold of Japanese defense in the Solomons. Five separate airfields ringed the base there, stocked with several hundred aircraft maintained by 20,000 of the Empire's best aircraft technicians. The anchorage at Simpson's Harbor could usually be counted upon to be swarming with a variety of Japanese warships. As a result, it had never been seriously threatened by the Americans.

However, with the invasion of Bougainville, Rabaul was now directly jeopardized for the first time. Because the Battle of Empress August Bay had not turned out to Japan's advantage, she needed to act quickly to stomp out this threat. The Navy therefore reacted to reinforce Rabaul and prepare a counterstroke against the Bougainville invasion by moving a variety of additional cruisers to Rabaul. This was potentially very bad news for the Americans, because they had barely come away from the battle on the 2nd with a margin of victory. Against the forces now massing at Rabaul, there would be little chance of the American light surface units in the neighborhood of Bougainville prevailing. Furthermore, most of the US battleships and cruisers were elsewhere preparing for the invasion of Tarawa. In order to pre-empt a move by the Japanese, Rear-Admiral Frederick Sherman put together a bold operational plan to attack the Japanese force at its base. Racing in under a weather front with two carriers, Sherman relied on land-based airpower from New Guinea to protect his ships, while launching every one of his own planes to attack Rabaul. His sagacity was rewarded by near-total surprise and clear weather over the target.

Simpson's Harbor was crowded with ships, and most of them were refueling and in no way prepared to get underway. As they frantically cast off and scrambled for the harbor entrance, American aircraft had a field day. While no Japanese ships were sunk, many were damaged and would have to be sent back to Japan for months of repair work. Fewer than a dozen attacking aircraft were shot down. Upon recovering their aircraft, Sherman's raiders then raced away southward towards friendly air cover. The Japanese were unable to locate them before they escaped. Any Japanese hopes of contesting the Bougainville landings had vanished.

No one realized it at the time, but Rabaul was essentially finished as a prime naval base for the Japanese. Land-based airpower would now keep it under constant air attack, and its own air groups would be steadily depleted. As time passed, Rabaul would become a backwater, its garrison of nearly 100,000 men left to 'wither on the vine,' its large group of skilled aircraft mechanics left with less and less to do.



Crewmen of USS Saratoga lifting Kenneth Bratton out of turret of TBF after raid on Rabaul, Nov 1943

Battle of Cape St. George

With the Americans now consolidating their hold over Bougainville, the Japanese began beefing up troops and supplies on the island of Buka. On November 25, they put together yet another 'Tokyo Express' of five destroyers, three of them laden with troops, and sent them out of Rabaul. Waiting for them were six American destroyers. The Japanese succeeded in dropping off their loads at Buka, but trouble began on the way back home.

American radar spotted the Japanese first, allowing the Americans to close and launch torpedoes without being initially detected. Both of the Japanese screening destroyers were hit, sinking one (Onami) and crippling the other (Makinami). The Americans then closed in on the destroyer-transport, who scattered and ran for it. Yugiri didn't make it, being pounded by several opponents. The crippled Makinami was also sunk. The American forces tried a stern chase of the other two fleeing Japanese destroyers, but were unable to catch them.

No realized it at the time, but this was the last 'Tokyo Express', and the last surface fight in the Solomons. Freed from screening duties, US destroyers had again held their own against their vaunted Japanese adversaries. There would be no more major naval battles until the invasion of Saipan.



Legend:

-  = Battle
-  = Campaign

- #1 = [Battle of Eastern Solomons](#), August 23-25, 1942
- #2 = [Battle of Santa Cruz](#), October 25-27, 1942
- #3 = [Battle of the Bismarck Sea](#), March 3-4, 1943
- #4 = [Battle of Kula Gulf](#), July 6, 1943
- #5 = [Battle of Vella Gulf](#), August 6-7, 1943
- #6 = [Battle off Horaniu](#), August 18, 1943
- #7 = [Battle of Vella Lavella](#), October 6, 1943
- #8 = [Battle of Empress Augusta Bay](#), November 2, 1943
- #9 = [Carrier Raid on Rabaul](#), November 5, 1943
- #10 = [Battle of Cape St. George](#), November 26, 1943

[Aftermath](#)

G = [Battles off of Guadalcanal](#)

For an excellent account of this campaign recommend 'The Lost Ships of Guadalcanal' by Robert Ballard is recommended. [Source: <http://www.funtrivia.com/playquiz/quiz2600451dc5d20.html> & http://www.combinedfleet.com/battles/Solomon_Islands_Campaign May 2011 ++]