



# H-Gram 010: Guadalcanal—Operation on a Shoestring

29 September 2017

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Marines build front-line defenses around Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, August–September 1942 (80-G-27194).

## World War II at 75

### 1. Forgotten Valor: The Sacrifice of TRANSDIV 12

On 15 August 1942, five days after the U.S. Navy "abandoned" the U.S. Marines on Guadalcanal, four Navy fast transports (APDs) of Transport Division (TRANSDIV) 12 arrived off Lunga Point and unloaded ammunition, aviation gasoline, aviation-maintenance gear, and about a hundred Marines and Navy personnel who would establish an airfield operations capability at what would become Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. Making multiple supply runs to Guadalcanal over the next days, the lightly armed converted obsolescent World War I-vintage destroyers relied on speed for survival. None of

them would survive the war. Three of them wouldn't survive the next three weeks. USS Colhoun (APD-2) was bombed and sunk by 18 Japanese bombers while unloading off Guadalcanal on 30 August, with the loss of 51 of her crew.

USS Gregory (APD-3) and USS Little (APD-4) went down in a valiant but hopeless night fight against three Japanese destroyers just off Guadalcanal on 4–5 September. Under the overall command of Commander Hugh W. Hadley, embarked on Little, as the two APDs turned to attack the Japanese destroyers that had just commenced shelling the Marines ashore, their slim chance of achieving surprise was accidentally betrayed by flares dropped from a U.S. Navy PBY Catalina, which mistook the

APDs for a Japanese submarine. The startled Japanese, who had failed to previously detect the APDs, shifted their fire from the Marines ashore. Five hundred Japanese shells later, the two APDs were on the bottom of Ironbottom Sound with almost 90 crewmen, including Hadley and the skippers of Gregory and Little. Their sacrifice preventing further shelling of the Marines that night.

Left out of most histories of the battle of Guadalcanal, this action ("Miscellaneous Action in the South Pacific") cost a similar number of Navy lives as Marines lost in the far more famous Battle of Bloody Ridge (approximately 90-100 killed in action) on Guadalcanal on 12-14 September. Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner, commander of U.S. naval forces off Guadalcanal, wrote, "The officers and men serving in these ships have shown great courage and have performed outstanding service. They entered this dangerous area time after time, well knowing their ships stood little or no chance if they should be opposed by any surface or air force the enemy would send into those waters." Yet, to support the Marines, they did. Commander Hadley, Lieutenant Commander Harry F. Bauer (CO Gregory) and Lieutenant Commander Gus B. Lofberg (CO Little) were each awarded a posthumous Silver Star. For more on Navy efforts to supply the Marines on Guadalcanal, please see attachment H-010-1: "Operation Shoestring."

## **2. Battle of the Eastern Solomons**

The third carrier battle of World War II, which took place in open waters northeast of the Solomon Islands on 24 August, was a victory for the U.S. Navy by a very narrow margin. As at the Battle of Midway, the Japanese had overall numerical superiority, but in terms of the decisive weapon of the battle, dive bombers, the U.S. had superiority of 68 to 54. And, as at the Battle of Midway, but for some lucky breaks, the Japanese could have turned the battle into a disaster for the U.S. However, the Japanese also caught a huge break when just before the battle, the U.S. commander, Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, detached the carrier USS Wasp (CV-7) and her escorts to refuel, causing them (and 60 carrier aircraft) to miss the battle entirely. Unlike at the Battle of Midway, for a variety of reasons, U.S. naval

intelligence was unable to provide as precise an advance notice of the timing of Japanese intentions, or the locations of the Japanese carriers, which contributed to Fletcher's decision to release the Wasp at a critical point (although intelligence was clearly reported that the biggest Japanese operation since Midway was imminent.) As a result, two U.S. carriers, the flagship USS Saratoga (CV-3) and USS Enterprise (CV-6), with 154 carrier aircraft, faced off against two Japanese fleet carriers, Shokaku and Zuikaku (veterans of Pearl Harbor and Coral Sea, but which missed Midway) and the light carrier Ryujo, with about 180 (171 operational) carrier aircraft, all under the command of Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, who was still in command of the Japanese carrier force despite the debacle at the Battle of Midway.

Both sides attempted to incorporate lessons learned from the Battle of Midway, the key one being to strike first. Both sides had concluded that any strike now was better than a perfectly coordinated strike later. On the U.S. side, this manifested itself in multiple instances of two-aircraft formations on scouting missions immediately boldly attacking entire Japanese task groups as soon as they sighted the Japanese. On the Japanese side, having seen the slaughter of American torpedo bombers at Midway, the Japanese concluded that their own torpedo bombers were just as vulnerable, and held them back with the intent that dive bombers would work over American carriers first, resulting in the Japanese torpedo bombers never getting into the action, which no doubt saved U.S. carriers.

When the incredibly chaotic Battle of the Eastern Solomons was over (poor U.S. radio circuit discipline resulted in numerous missed contact reports and intercepts), the Japanese light carrier Ryujo had been sunk, with the loss of all but one of her 35 aircraft. A single torpedo from the reconstituted Torpedo Squadron Eight (which had lost 15 of 15 TBD Devastators and 5 of 6 TBF Avengers at Midway) dealt the mortal blow to the Ryujo. Unlike at Coral Sea, the Japanese fleet carrier Shokaku (now Nagumo's flagship) suffered only minor damage (Shokaku was equipped with Japan's first carrier search radar, which was surprisingly effective). The Japanese also lost the destroyer Mutsuki, the troop

transport Kinryu Maru, and significant damage to the light cruiser Jintsu and seaplane tender Chitose. Most importantly, the Japanese lost 75 aircraft (64 carrier aircraft) and, unlike Midway, most of their crews were not recovered. Including aircrew, about 300 Japanese died.

On the American side, the carrier USS Enterprise was damaged by three bomb hits, with heavy casualties (75 killed,) but was able to proceed under her own power (once steering was restored) to Pearl Harbor for repairs. The U.S. lost 25 aircraft (23 carrier aircraft plus one PBY Catalina and one B-17 bomber that crash-landed). Most of the carrier aircraft aircrew were recovered, several after many weeks of odyssey on remote islands (9 carrier aircrew men were lost) and total U.S. deaths reached 90.

The result of the battle was that the big Japanese push to reinforce Guadalcanal fizzled, and the large Japanese force withdrew after yet another failed attempt to draw U.S. Navy forces into a night surface battle. The victory was temporary, however, as the Japanese found other means (the "Tokyo Express") to get significantly more troops onto Guadalcanal. The rapidly increasing numbers of 20mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns on U.S. ships had significant effect; although the new gun lacked the range to knock down Japanese dive bombers and torpedo bombers before weapons' release, they were very effective in ensuring many of those attacking aircraft would never be able to make another attack. (For additional detail on the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, please see attachment H-010-2.)

### **3. "Torpedo Junction"**

On 15 September 1942, the Japanese submarine I-19, under the command of Lieutenant Commander Takaichi Kinashi, fired arguably the most effective spread of torpedoes in history. With six torpedoes, I-19 hit the aircraft carrier USS Wasp (CV-7) with at least two, possibly three torpedoes, which ultimately sank her with a loss of 173 of her crew, one newspaper correspondent, and 45 aircraft. One torpedo passed under the destroyer USS Lansdowne (DD-486) before travelling several miles with two other torpedoes into the screen of the USS Hornet (CV-8). One torpedo passed under the destroyer USS

Mustin (DD-413) before blowing a 32-by-1-foot hole in the new fast battleship USS North Carolina (BB-55). Although still able to make 25 knots, her forward magazines were flooded as a precaution, and the North Carolina was put out of action for two months for repairs. The destroyer USS O'Brien (DD-415) evaded one torpedo astern, but was hit in the bow by another. After temporary repairs, her crew sailed the O'Brien 2,800 miles before she broke apart and sank on 19 October near Samoa while en route Pearl Harbor for additional repair. The two carriers were providing cover for transports carrying the 7th Marine Regiment en route to reinforce the Marines on Guadalcanal when attacked by I-19.

The loss of Wasp left the U.S. with two fleet carriers (Hornet, which had just missed being torpedoed on 6 September, and USS Enterprise [CV-6], damaged at the Battle of the Eastern Solomons) against Japan's two remaining fleet carriers (Pearl Harbor, Coral Sea and Eastern Solomons veterans Shokaku and Zuikaku), and several medium and light carriers. The other U.S. fleet carrier, USS Saratoga (CV-3) had been torpedoed by I-26 on 31 August southeast of Guadalcanal. Although Saratoga's casualties were minimal (12 wounded, including Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, who suffered a laceration on the forehead), the carrier was put out of action for several months at a critical point in the Pacific War. Both I-26 and I-19 successfully evaded depth-charge counter-attacks, and I-26 would later sink the anti-aircraft cruiser USS Juneau (CL-52), on 13 November, with the loss of almost her entire crew (687 of 697 were lost) including all five Sullivan brothers. Although Admiral Fletcher's decision to move his carriers away from the immediate vicinity of Guadalcanal on 9 August after the landings on 7 August was heavily criticized at the time and by historians since, his concern that keeping the carriers in the same area for too long made them vulnerable to air or submarine attack actually proved well-founded. (For more on "Torpedo Junction" please see attachment H-010-3.)

### **4. Enlisted Hero: Samuel B. Roberts**

As the USS Samuel B. Roberts (FFG-58) was on fire and in critical danger of sinking after hitting an Iranian mine in the Arabian Gulf on 14 April 1988,

members of her crew were seen to place their hand on a bronze plaque listing the names of the Sailors who served on the first Samuel B. Roberts (DE-413) as if to draw inspiration from those who had sacrificed their lives when DE-413 went down on 25 October 1944 off Samar, Philippines, in an action Navy historian Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison described as the most gallant and gutsy in U.S. Navy history. Following the lead of Commander Ernest Evans on the USS Johnston (DD-557), who conducted a solo torpedo attack against a Japanese force of four battleships, eight cruisers and numerous destroyers, the Samuel B. Roberts's skipper, Lieutenant Commander Robert W. Copeland, attacking under orders from the Task Group Commander, informed his crew, "We are going into battle against overwhelming odds, from which survival cannot be expected. We will do what damage we can." After a valiant fight, including dueling a Japanese battleship, the lightly armed (two 5-inch guns) DE-413 went down under a storm of Japanese fire. In his after-action report, Copeland noted the valor of his crew and stated there was "no higher honor" than to command such men, which became the motto of FFG-58. The heroic fight by the Johnston, Samuel B. Roberts, and the other escorts and aircraft of "Taffy 3" caused the greatly superior Japanese force to turn away, preventing a catastrophe had the Japanese force gotten through to the supply ships and troop transports supporting General MacArthur's landing on Leyte. The crew of FFG-58 saved their ship from damage that subsequent modeling indicated should have sunk her.

FFG-58 was the third to bear the name Samuel B. Roberts. The second to bear the name, a Gearing-class destroyer (DD-823), served with distinction during the Cold War, Cuban Missile Crisis, and Vietnam. All of them lived up to the legacy of Samuel B. Roberts, a Navy coxswain, who sacrificed his life by drawing fire with his landing craft while extracting Marines from a failed amphibious insertion behind Japanese lines on Guadalcanal on 27 September 1942. For his heroism, Samuel B. Roberts was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross. When informed that the Navy wanted to name a ship after Roberts, his mother, who had served in World War I as a Yeoman (F,) sometimes called "Yeomanettes,"

agreed on condition that her younger son, Jack Roberts, be allowed to serve on the ship named for his brother. Jack Roberts survived the sinking at Samar, was present at the commissioning of FFG-58, and his name is on the bronze plaque with the rest of his shipmates, now preserved in the collection of the Naval History and Heritage Command. (Please see attachment H-010-4 for additional detail on Samuel B. Roberts, and H-010-5 for a photo of FFG-58's plaque commemorating DE-413's valor and sacrifice.)

## **5. Attacks on the United States Mainland**

On 9 September 1942, a Japanese E14Y1 "Glen" floatplane piloted by Petty Officer Nobuo Fujita launched from the submarine I-25 off the coast of Oregon and dropped two incendiary bombs in the forest near Brookings with the intent to start a major forest fire. This was the only bombing by a foreign nation of the U.S. mainland. The bombs failed to have the desired effect on this or a second attempt by Fujita on 29 September, and no further submarine-launched air attacks were conducted for the remainder of the war. Japanese B-1 type submarines carried one two-seat "Glen" that could be disassembled and stowed in a hangar forward of the conning tower. Just after the float plane had been recovered, disassembled and stowed on the first mission, the I-25 was bombed by a U.S. Army Air Force Hudson bomber with minor damage. (For additional reading on other attacks on the U.S. mainland by Japanese submarines and German saboteurs, please see attachment H-010-6.)

## **6. 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War**

I can't compete (at least cinematically) with the Ken Burns' Vietnam series now on PBS, but I thought these two vignettes written by retired U.S. Navy captain James Bloom (who writes an independent "Today in Naval History" blog, an activity I highly encourage!) are great examples of heroism demonstrated by U.S. Navy personnel in the Vietnam War:

- Lieutenant William C. Fitzgerald, USN (namesake of the USS Fitzgerald [DDG-62], recently involved in a fatal collision at sea) was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross for

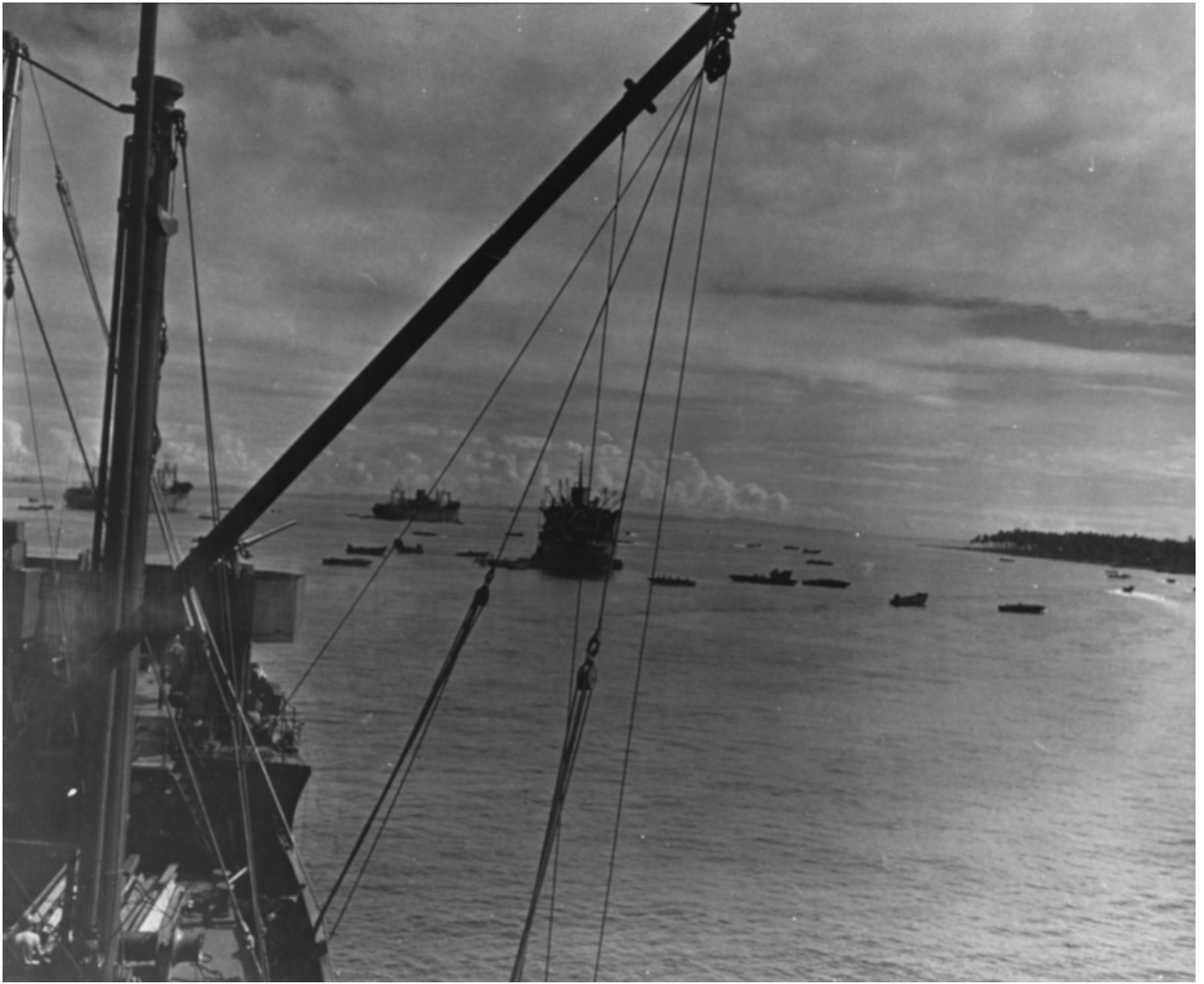
*calling in an artillery strike on his own position in order to enable his men to escape an intense Viet Cong assault on 7 August 1967.*

- *Lieutenant Vincent R. Capodanno, CHC, USNR, was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor for sacrificing his life to protect U.S. Marines during a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) assault on 3 September 1967.*

*(For Captain Bloom's passages on Fitzgerald and Capodanno, please see attachment H-010-7.)*

*Major sources for this H-gram include: Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle by Richard B. Frank; History of United States Naval Operations in World War II Vol. V, The Struggle for Guadalcanal by Samuel Eliot Morison; Neptune's Inferno by James D. Hornfischer; The Conquering Tide: War in the Pacific Islands, 1942-1944 by Ian Toll; A Dawn Like Thunder: The True Story of Torpedo Squadron Eight by Robert J. Mrazek; Combined Fleet Decoded by John Prados; and No Higher Honor: Saving the USS Samuel B. Roberts in the Persian Gulf by Bradley Peniston.*





Amphibious shipping and landing craft off the Guadalcanal invasion beaches on the first day of landings there, 7 August 1942 (80-G-374870).

## H-010-1: Operation Shoestring

*H-Gram 010, [Attachment 1](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
September 2017*

For those who participated in Operation Watchtower, the Allied landing and occupation of Guadalcanal, the hastily planned and executed operation was more commonly known as "Operation Shoestring." Resource and supply shortfalls characterized much of the operation.

When the U.S. Navy transports and supply ships left the immediate vicinity of Guadalcanal on 9 August 1942 for safer waters farther south (see H-Gram 009), the Marines ashore on the island were left with about four days' worth of supplies. This is somewhat deceiving since the last hours of ferrying supplies ashore were marked by considerable haste and chaos. With Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher's decision to move his three carriers farther away from Guadalcanal, which deprived the U.S. invasion force of close air cover, and with Rear Admiral Kelly Turner's heaviest escorts sunk by the Japanese off Savo Island, the transport and supply ships unloaded as much as they could as fast as they could, but many

supplies and much equipment was still aboard the ships when they departed. Because the concept of "combat loading" was still in a learning phase, much of what did get ashore was a hodgepodge, strewn up and down the landing beach because the ability to offload from boats exceeded the capacity to get the supplies off the beach. As a result, Turner left behind a number of landing craft and their Navy and Coast Guard coxswains and crews (who volunteered) to assist with moving and consolidating supplies. One of the Navy coxswains was Samuel B. Roberts (see H-010-4).

Fortunately for the Marines, there was minimal Japanese opposition in the first weeks on the island. Most of the Japanese on the island had been construction troops who were in the process of clearing land for use as an airfield, and who had fled into the jungle, where without supplies of their own they quickly became mostly combat-ineffective (but still executed some deadly ambushes). The uncompleted Japanese airfield was the reason the Americans landed on Guadalcanal in the first place, and Marines immediately took over the task of finishing the airfield. The Marines named the airstrip Henderson Field, after Major Lofton Henderson, who had been commander of the Marine bombing squadron based on Midway Island, and who had been shot down and killed while trying to attack the Japanese carrier force in the first hours of the Battle of Midway on 4 June 1942. Using brute muscle power and some captured Japanese equipment (much of their own construction equipment hadn't made it ashore yet), the Marines made rapid progress. On 12 August, the first landing was made on Henderson Field by a U.S. Navy PBV Catalina flying boat.

Just as the Marines' supply situation became critical, the four fast transports of Transport Division 12 arrived on 15 August, under orders from Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, the Commander of the South Pacific Area, to make all efforts to keep the Marines supplied. The fast

transports (converted World War I destroyers) *Colhoun* (APD-2), *Gregory* (APD-3), *Little* (APD-4), and *McKean* (APD-5), under the command of Commander Hugh W. Hadley, USN, mostly delivered supplies and gear intended to make Henderson Field operational. The Marines had the benefit of captured Japanese rations, so food was not a critical issue at that point (the four APDs returned on 20 August with rations for the Marines). Another U.S. ship attempting to supply the Marines, the overloaded converted China riverboat *Lakotai*, capsized and sank all by herself before reaching Guadalcanal.

Japanese reinforcement efforts began on 16 August, as Japanese destroyers began landing troops and supplies on Guadalcanal at night. This would set the pattern for the first months of the battle. Japanese destroyers (and their own versions of destroyer-transports) would arrive at night to offload troops and supplies, generally unmolested by the U.S., with the intent to be far enough back up the Solomon Island chain by daylight to avoid being attacked by U.S. carrier- or Henderson Field-based aircraft. During daylight hours, Japanese land-based bombers, escorted by Zero fighters, would fly from airfields in the northern Solomons to try to strike U.S. carriers, bomb the Marines on Guadalcanal, or sink any U.S. ships attempting to resupply the Marines ashore. By the end of August, the pattern was essentially that the Japanese owned the night at sea. Control of the sky during the day was hotly contested with heavy losses in aircraft on both sides, but any Japanese ships caught in daylight were vulnerable to U.S. attack.

On 20 August, the USS *Long Island* (CVE-1), a merchant ship converted to an "escort carrier" (the first of about 100 to be built during the war), flew off 19 Wildcat fighters and 12 SBD Dauntless dive bombers of Marine squadrons VMF-233 and VMSB-232, which landed at Henderson Field and became the first of what became known as the "Cactus Air Force" ("Cactus" was the Allied code name for Guadalcanal). On 22 August, 14 U.S.

Army Air Force P-400 fighters were brought in. (The P-400 was the export version of the P-39 originally intended for Russia—no match for Japanese fighters and unable to reach the altitude that Japanese land-based bombers normally operated, the P-400s did prove useful in a close-support ground-attack role). Combat and operational losses were heavy. By the end of August, only five of the Wildcats and four P-400s were still flyable. However, the number of aircraft based at Henderson gradually increased and included U.S. Navy aircraft from carriers that were sunk or damaged, and was a constantly changing mix of mostly Marine, Navy and some Army Air Force fighter, dive bomber, and a few torpedo bomber aircraft (remnants of Torpedo 8 flown off the USS *Saratoga* [CV-3] after she was damaged by a torpedo on 31 August, for example). Air battles between Japanese fighters (protecting Japanese bombers) and U.S. fighters (attempting to reach the Japanese bombers) were an almost daily occurrence in the skies over Guadalcanal, interrupted only by weather and the extreme range that Japanese aircraft had to fly to reach the island. The Japanese would also frequently send a float plane or a bomber to harass the Marines at night; although annoying, these night flights were rarely effective.

By 20 August, Japanese destroyers had put ashore about 900 men of Colonel Kiyonao Ichiki's regiment, which was originally intended to be the Japanese landing force on Midway Island. Ichiki rashly decided not to wait for the remaining two thirds of his regiment to be delivered to the island, and launched a frontal attack on the Marines on the night of 21 August. The first *banzai* charge, which had worked so well against poorly trained Chinese troops, was cut to ribbons by the well-dug-in and disciplined Marines in what would be known as the Battle of the Tenaru River. The total rout and slaughter of Japanese troops continued into the next day as Marine light tanks wiped out the last remaining pocket of Japanese troops trapped in a coconut grove. Ichiki committed suicide. Some Japanese feigned death

or surrender, only to kill Marines with hidden grenades. Following this battle, taking prisoners by either side became a very rare event. About 40 Marines died in the battle, compared to over 600 Japanese.

On 21 August, the supply ships *Fomalhaut* (AK-22) and *Alhena* (AKA-9) arrived with additional supplies for the Marines, escorted by the destroyers *Blue* (DD-387), *Henley* (DD-391), and *Helm* (DD-388), which remained overnight. At about 0300 on 22 August, the radar-equipped *Blue* was hit in the stern by a torpedo from an undetected and unseen Japanese destroyer, the *Kawakaze* (which was operating alone,) killing nine of *Blue*'s crew. This was the second time that Japanese eyeballs had proved superior to *Blue*'s radar (the Japanese cruiser force had slipped past *Blue*'s radar picket patrol to attack and sink the Allied cruisers at the Battle of Savo Island). The damage was severe enough that *Blue* had to be scuttled on 23 June as it became apparent that a major Japanese force was on the way to Guadalcanal (see H-010-2: The Battle of the Eastern Solomons).

On 28 August, a Japanese resupply convoy was caught in daylight by Marine aircraft from Henderson Field, and the Japanese destroyer *Asagiri* was sunk. The Japanese became much more careful about exposing themselves in daylight. Nevertheless, additional Japanese troops began to get ashore on Guadalcanal, under the command of Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi. The Japanese were still grossly overconfident of their ability to defeat the Marines on the island, but unlike Ichiki, Kawaguchi had better sense to build up his forces until he was ready to mount a much larger attack on the Marines in mid-September in what would become known as the Battle of Bloody Ridge (or Edson's Ridge). However, as the Japanese built up their forces, so too did the Marines, as the Navy fast transports continued to deliver supplies.



On 30 August, the fast transport *Colhoun* (Lieutenant Commander Madden commanding) paid the price as she and *Little* were covering off-loading from the transport *Kopara* (AK-62/AG-50) under a mostly cloudy sky. However, a flight of 18 Japanese twin-engine bombers arrived overhead while Marine fighters were on the ground refueling following an earlier air attack. The bombers spotted the *Colhoun* through a lucky break in the clouds and from high above *Colhoun's* four 20 mm anti-aircraft guns' range, unleashed an astonishingly accurate barrage of bombs. Although trying to get up speed, *Colhoun* suffered two direct hits, and then a string of five near misses along the length of the hull, causing major structural damage, before two more direct hits. *Colhoun* sank in under two minutes with the loss of over 50 of her crew. (This may be the most accurate bombing of a ship by high-altitude horizontal bombing during the war).

From the period 30 August to 5 September, the *Little* (Lieutenant Commander Gus Brynolf Lofberg, Jr., commanding, and TRANSDIV 12 commander, Commander Hugh W. Hadley, embarked) and the *Gregory* (LCDR Harry F. Bauer commanding) remained in the Guadalcanal area, transporting supplies from ships off-loading in Tulagi Harbor across the sound to the beach at Guadalcanal (which had no harbor). On 4 September, *Little* and *Gregory* embarked the Marine 1st Raider Battalion from Tulagi, transported them to Savo Island in response to reports that Japanese had landed on the island (the Japanese apparently had just left), and then disembarked the Raiders on Guadalcanal, by which time night had fallen. Due to an overcast, it was a very dark night, and with no navigation aids to show the way through poorly charted waters to Tulagi, Hadley opted to spend the night off Lunga Point, Guadalcanal. What Hadley did not know was that a Japanese "Tokyo Express" run arrived off Guadalcanal that same night, consisting of the light cruiser *Sendai* and 11 destroyers. (At the time, the almost nightly Japanese supply and reinforcement runs were known to those on

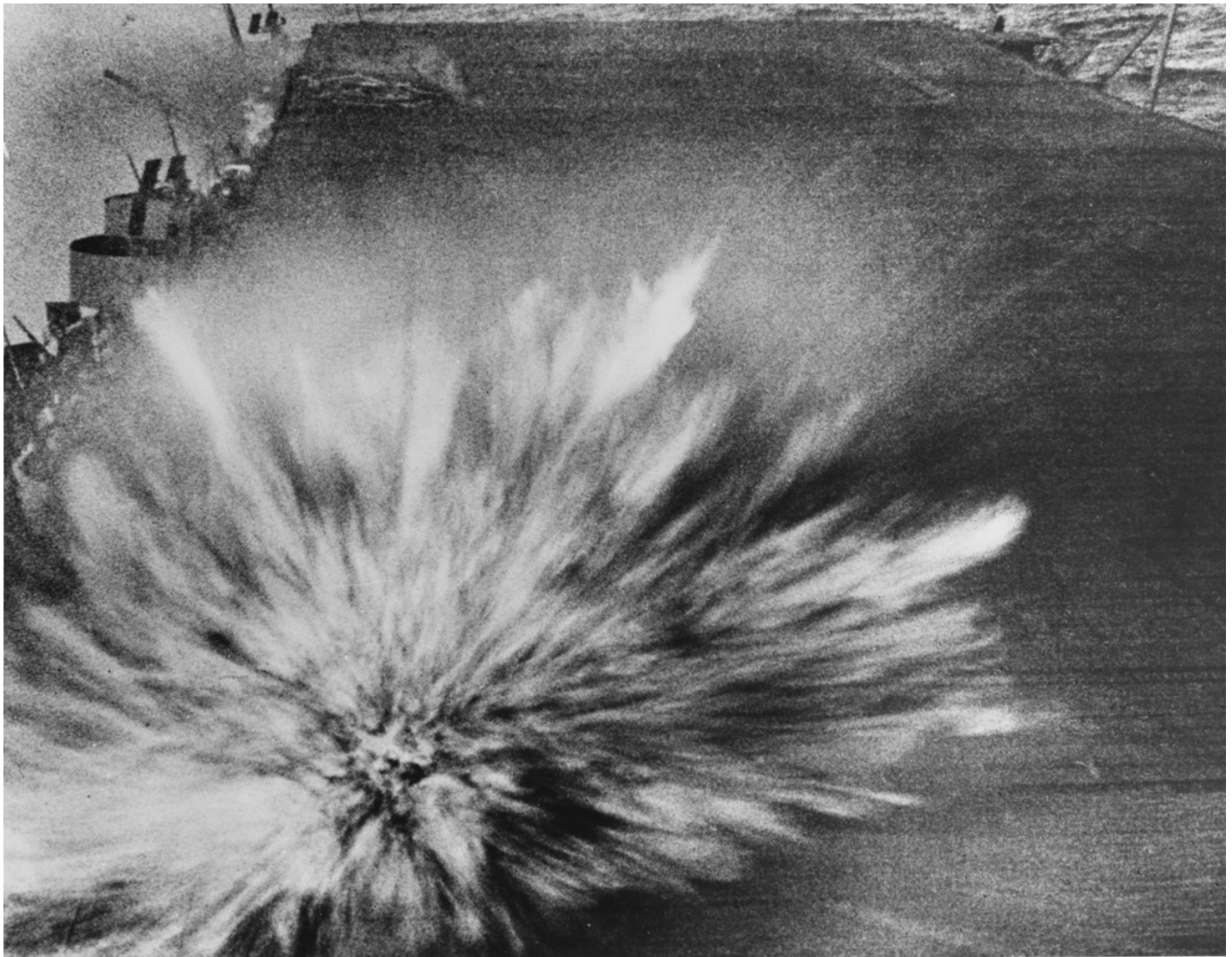
Guadalcanal as the "Cactus Express." "Tokyo Express" was a later invention by the press.)

Six of the Japanese destroyers offloaded about 1,000 Japanese troops on Guadalcanal to the west of *Little* and *Gregory*, adding to Major General Kawaguchi's build-up. Three Japanese destroyers, *Yudachi*, *Hatsuyaki*, and *Murakumo*, passed just north of *Little* and *Gregory* to the east. Neither the U.S. nor the Japanese sighted each other on the dark night. At 0100 on 5 September, the three Japanese destroyers opened fire on Marine positions ashore on Guadalcanal. At first, the crews of *Little* and *Gregory* thought the fire came from a Japanese submarine (it was also routine on many nights for a Japanese submarine to surface and lob a few rounds at the Marines). Both ships went to general quarters and prepared to attack the "submarine." However, when radar on *Little* indicated four separate contacts (although there were only three), Hadley was faced with a decision. He could remain in place and hope the Japanese would not detect him when they returned to the west to exit the area. He could attempt to flee to the west and hope the Japanese would not detect and run him down (Hadley didn't know it, but this course would have taken him toward an even larger Japanese force), or he could hope that with the Japanese focused on shelling the shore, he might have the advantage of surprise and could launch a desperation attack.

As the *Little* and *Gregory* turned to attack, a U.S. Navy PBY Catalina flying boat searching for the "submarine," and not knowing the U.S. ships were there, dropped a string of flares directly ahead of the U.S. ships. With their cover blown and all hope of surprise lost, nevertheless the two hopelessly out-gunned APDs charged the startled Japanese destroyers. The three Japanese destroyers, modern ships with advanced fire control, exceptional night-fighting capability, and a total of 17 5-inch guns, quickly shifted their fire from the beach to the onrushing U.S. ships. The battle was short and ugly. Initial Japanese salvos still had

anti-personnel rounds loaded, which caused no real structural damage, but decimated American gunners in the exposed topside gun mounts. However, soon the two APDs were riddled by shellfire, as the Japanese fired over 500 rounds in a matter of 15 minutes. Hadley and Lofberg were both killed on the bridge of *Little* by the avalanche of shellfire. The severely wounded CO of *Gregory* (Bauer) survived the sinking of his ship, but while in the water directed two Sailors who were assisting him to go to the aid of another wounded Sailor, and was never seen again. The Japanese destroyers steamed right between the two burning and sinking ships, right through survivors, still pouring fire into the ships and men in the water. Almost 90 Sailors from the *Little* and *Gregory* were lost that night or subsequently died of wounds. (The figure of 22 killed on *Little* and 11 on *Gregory* in Rear Admiral Turner's original report, subsequently reflected in Morison's account, was incorrect. Even Richard Frank's excellent book on Guadalcanal gets the casualties correct in the appendix of losses, but incorrect in the account of the battle. Most works don't even mention it.)

For their heroism against overwhelming odds, Hadley, Lofberg, and Bauer were awarded posthumous Silver Stars. The *Sumner*-class destroyers USS *Hugh W. Hadley* (DD-774), USS *Lofberg* (DD-759), and the *Robert H. Smith*-class destroyer-minelayer USS *Harry F. Bauer* (DD-738/DM-26) were named in honor of the heroes of this "miscellaneous battle." (Of note, the model of the destroyer in the U.S. Naval Academy Superintendent's Quarters—Buchanan House—is the USS *Lofberg*.)



*Battle of the Eastern Solomons, August 1942: A Japanese bomb exploding on the flight deck of USS Enterprise (CV-6), just aft of the island, on 24 August 1942 (80-G-17489).*

## **H-010-2: The Battle of the Eastern Solomons, 23–25 August 1942**

*H-Gram 010, [Attachment 2](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
September 2017*

The commander-in-chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, immediately grasped the strategic significance of the American landings on Guadalcanal and Tulagi on 7 August 1942. Despite his staggering losses at the Battle of Midway on 4 June, Yamamoto

quickly set in motion a major operation to counter the U.S. landings. While Rear Admiral Mikawa dealt a devastating blow to Allied naval forces off Guadalcanal at the Battle of Savo Island in the pre-dawn hours of 9 August using cruiser forces at hand, major elements of the Japanese navy began assembling at the major base at Truk, several hundred miles north of Guadalcanal, with the intent to rapidly eject the Americans from Guadalcanal. This force would consist of two fleet aircraft carriers, two medium carriers, one light carrier, four battleships, 16 cruisers, and 30 destroyers, outnumbering U.S. naval forces in the Solomons area in every category except fleet carriers (two Japanese to three U.S. fleet carriers).

Unfortunately for the Japanese navy, the Japanese army did not share Yamamoto's sense of urgency, remaining supremely overconfident in their ability to kick the Americans off the island whenever they got around to it. Challenges in getting the Japanese army to commit forces to the battle on Guadalcanal delayed the fleet's action until late August.

The Japanese made numerous organizational, tactical, and operational security changes following their defeat at the Battle of Midway. However, the unexpected rapidity of U.S. offensive action in the Solomon Islands caught the Japanese by surprise, and many of the changes had not been fully implemented, nor in many cases had the Japanese been able to conduct sufficient training in new tactics and procedures. The two remaining Japanese fleet carriers, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, were reorganized into Carrier Division 1 (since *Akagi* and *Kaga* had been sunk at Midway). The light carrier *Ryujo* was also added to CARDIV 1, with a heavy complement of 24 Zero fighters and nine Kate torpedo bombers, with the intent that *Ryujo* would supply the fighters for fleet defense (and torpedo bombers for a last-ditch reserve strike), while the fleet carriers focused exclusively on engaging and defeating U.S. carriers. In this way, the Japanese hoped to avoid the conflicting mission requirements that led them to disaster at Midway. Another major change in tactics was that the Japanese now intended to hold all their torpedo bombers in reserve, and wait for the dive bombers to soften up the targets before committing the more vulnerable torpedo bombers (losses among those torpedo bombers that actually reached the U.S. carrier *Yorktown* [CV-5] at Midway were almost as devastating as those suffered by the American torpedo bombers). The Japanese still adhered to their doctrinal approach to conduct strikes with combined carrier air groups (i.e., aircraft integrated from two carriers into a single strike package), which allowed for more rapid launch, assembly, and push to target than the American

approach of independent strike packages by different carriers, that might (or might not) be loosely coordinated. Another revised tactic was for Japanese battleships and cruisers to operate a considerable distance ahead of the carriers to provide early warning, diversion, and increased possibility of closing for surface action with U.S. forces; the downside was that these forward forces were therefore more vulnerable to air attack. However, the Japanese reasoned that any bomb that hit a battleship or cruiser was a bomb that didn't hit an aircraft carrier, and the battleships and cruisers could absorb the damage much better than a carrier—and, the Japanese were basically right. Also, in a first for the Japanese, the *Shokaku* carried radar, which at one point in the battle detected U.S. aircraft at 97 nautical miles, the best performance by any radar on either side.

The major changes in organization, changes to the JN-25 code, call-sign changes, better communications security, and other measures adversely affected the ability Commander Joseph Rochefort's code breakers and communications-traffic analysts, and of Admiral Nimitz's intelligence officer Commander Eddie Layton, to accurately predict Japanese actions and timing. It was apparent that the Japanese were forming up a very large force for operations in the vicinity of Guadalcanal, but delays on the Japanese side adversely affected intelligence predictions of the timing. Naval Intelligence also had a very difficult time locating the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, holding them still in home waters even after they had departed for Truk, and only concluding they had arrived at Truk the day before the battle (when they had already left Truk and were en route to what would be the battle area northeast of Guadalcanal). The commander of the U.S. carrier task force (TF 61), Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, knew from intelligence that a major Japanese push was coming around 23–25 August, but had no firm estimate on the presence of Japanese carriers until the eve of battle—and only after he had released the carrier *Wasp* (CV-7) to

go south to refuel, taking a third of Fletcher's strike capability with her. Many historians (in addition to CNO King at the time) have uncharitably commented that Fletcher never passed up an opportunity to refuel, whether needed or not. However, in this case Fletcher was directed to do so by the South Pacific Area commander, Vice Admiral Ghormley, who was making decisions based on the same ambiguous intelligence as Fletcher. The Japanese also had great difficulty trying to locate the U.S. carriers; usually their best indication was when a reconnaissance aircraft ceased reporting, which meant it had probably been shot down. Bad weather also played havoc with both sides during the course of the battle, several times preventing Japanese land-based aircraft from the northern Solomons from flying missions to Guadalcanal in support of the Japanese carrier operations.

### ***Actions on 23 August***

At 0950, a U.S. Navy Catalina flying boat spotted a Japanese convoy north of Guadalcanal heading toward the island. This convoy was under the command of Rear Admiral Raizo Tanaka (whose name would become indelibly associated with the "Tokyo Express") and consisted of his flagship, the light cruiser *Jintsu*, eight destroyers, and three troop transports carrying 1,500 troops of Colonel Ichiki's second echelon (Ichiki himself and his first echelon had already been virtually annihilated at the Battle of Tenaru River on Guadalcanal on 21 August), and the 5th Yokosuka Special Naval Landing Force. Upon being sighted, Tanaka reversed course. Search planes from USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) sighted three Japanese submarines during the day, indicative of a screen ahead of a Japanese force movement.

Fletcher held back, awaiting reports from any scout planes on the presence of Japanese carriers, but none were located. Finally Fletcher directed a strike on Tanaka's convoy, and, at 1510, the carrier USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) launched a 37-plane strike (31 SBD Dauntless dive bombers and six of the new TBF Avenger torpedo

bombers, the latter from the reconstituted Torpedo Squadron 8; these were aircraft that had arrived at Pearl Harbor, but had not made it to the USS *Hornet* [CV-8] or Midway Island before the battle commenced). The strike, led by *Saratoga* Air Group commander Commander Harry D. Felt, encountered very bad weather, but pressed on despite severe buffeting and extensive periods of near-zero visibility. Commander Felt later expressed extreme satisfaction with the flying discipline of his aircrews when they emerged through the weather in good order formation. However, by this time, Tanaka was nowhere to be found. After a fruitless search, with light waning, and the prospect of having to fly back through the weather to the *Saratoga*, Felt opted to recover on Henderson Field, where Navy pilots got to enjoy a mostly sleepless night, including being fired upon by the Japanese destroyer *Kagero*. Marine aircraft from Henderson Field had also unsuccessfully attempted to locate Tanaka's convoy. Too late in the day, U.S. search planes located elements of Vice Admiral Kondo's advance force of battleships and cruisers, operating ahead of Vice Admiral Nagumo's as-yet-undetected carrier force

### ***The Carrier Battle, 24 August***

Before dawn on 24 August, Nagumo detached the light carrier *Ryujo* from the main carrier force to provide air cover for Tanaka's convoy. At 0946, a PBY sighted the *Ryujo*. Having sent a large strike force on a wild-goose chase the day before, which was still in the air returning to the *Saratoga* from their night ashore on Guadalcanal, Fletcher held back, awaiting sighting reports on Japanese fleet carriers. Fletcher did not want a repeat of the Battle of Coral Sea, where he had learned the location of the same *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* only after he had already committed the entire air groups of both his carriers against the light carrier *Shoho*. Commander Felt's strike group began recovering on *Saratoga* at 1105. At 1128, Fletcher received a second location report on the *Ryujo*. He ordered more search aircraft aloft, but still held back from committing a strike on *Ryujo*. At 1213, *Saratoga* Wildcats shot down a Japanese

land-based Emily four-engine reconnaissance seaplane, while at 1228, *Enterprise* Wildcats destroyed a land-based twin-engine Betty bomber. U.S. radio intelligence reported that neither aircraft had gotten off a contact report, but Fletcher made the assumption they had.

With no sighting reports of U.S. carriers, Nagumo was in even more of the dark than Fletcher. So at 1230, *Ryujo* commenced her secondary mission, launching 15 Zero fighters and six Kates (armed as horizontal bombers) to attack Guadalcanal in what was supposed to be a coordinated strike with Japanese land-based bombers (which had turned back due to bad weather). *Saratoga*'s radar detected *Ryujo*'s strike as it headed in-bound toward Guadalcanal. Three of *Ryujo*'s Zeros and four Kates were lost on the ineffective bombing mission to Guadalcanal, which was disrupted by Marine fighters at a cost of three Wildcats.

At 1345, *Saratoga* launched 30 SBD dive bombers and eight TBF torpedo bombers (with no fighter escort), again under the command of Felt, to attack the *Ryujo*. At 1410, two *Enterprise* TBF torpedo bombers on a search mission located and reported the *Ryujo*, but interference between fighter-direction and search frequencies prevented *Enterprise* from receiving the message; the two TBFs then conducted an unsuccessful air attack on *Ryujo*. Two more *Enterprise* TBFs found the *Ryujo* shortly after, and one was shot down by *Ryujo* fighters. Two more *Enterprise* SBDs located the Japanese Advance Force and conducted an unsuccessful attack on the Japanese heavy cruiser *Maya*.

Meanwhile, a bit after 1400, a floatplane from the Japanese heavy cruiser *Chikuma* sighted the U.S. carriers. Again, U.S. fighters shot the plane down before it could issue a contact report, but this time the Japanese immediately figured out that the loss of contact was a strong indication of the presence of U.S. carrier aircraft (and carriers), and, in short order, additional scout aircraft were en route toward the last known location of the

downed plane. Unlike at Midway, Nagumo did not hesitate. At 1455, while *Saratoga*'s air group was headed toward *Ryujo*, 27 Val dive bombers and ten fighter escorts in an integrated strike from *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* were launching to strike the U.S. carriers, while a second similar-sized strike package was being spotted on deck and armed to launch another strike an hour later. The Japanese battleships in the Advance Force, *Hiei* and *Kirishima*, increased speed to close on the American position. As the two strike groups were attacking or heading toward the U.S. carriers, nine B-17s bombed the Japanese carriers from high altitude around 1800, but, as at Midway, hit nothing, although they did shoot down a Zero.

Despite his best efforts, this time Fletcher was in an even worse situation than at Coral Sea. There, the Japanese main carrier force did not know where the U.S. carriers were when almost the entire U.S. strike capability was committed against a less important target (the *Shoho*). This time, the Japanese main carrier force had a good idea where the U.S. carriers were, whereas U.S. scouts had yet to locate the main Japanese carrier force or even spot any carrier aircraft (except those from *Ryujo*, which, like the *Shoho*, was a much less important target than the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*).

Shortly before 1500, two *Enterprise* SBD Dauntless dive bombers on a scouting mission sighted the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, issued a contact report that failed to get through to the *Enterprise*, and immediately attacked the Japanese carriers. Flown by Lieutenant Ray Davis and Ensign R. C. Shaw, the two SBDs were detected by *Shokaku*'s radar, but in coordination problems of their own, the Japanese radar report failed to get to the bridge. However, *Shokaku*'s lookouts spotted the two dive bombers just in time for *Shokaku* to take evasive action, causing both bombs to barely miss, although they nevertheless killed six *Shokaku* crewmen. A post-strike report also failed to reach the *Enterprise*, but was intercepted by *Saratoga*, which was the first word Fletcher had that Japanese carriers were nearby. Once again,



the U.S. strike was committed to a lesser target, but this time Japanese strikes were inbound.

After initially seeing nothing but empty ocean, the *Saratoga* strike group finally found the *Ryujo* and her escorts at 1536. Commander Felt divided his formation. At 1550, 18 SBD dive bombers and five TBF torpedo bombers went after *Ryujo*, while seven SBDs and two TBFs went after the heavy cruiser *Tone*. Captain Tadao Kato proved to be extremely competent at evasive maneuvers, causing the first ten dive bombers to miss. Felt then directed that all aircraft go after the *Ryujo* and dove on *Ryujo* himself, leading the way by personally planting a bomb on the ship (although Kato later claimed that none of the U.S. dive bombers scored a direct hit, near misses were numerous and damaging). The seven SBDs that had been initially directed to attack *Tone* pulled up in mid-dive and then attacked *Ryujo*, claiming several hits. The two TBF's didn't get the word and conducted an unsuccessful torpedo attack on *Tone*. The other five TBF's of Torpedo Eight kept trying to set up an attack on the *Ryujo*, but spray from the near misses kept obscuring the target. After several attempts, the TBFs executed a near textbook "anvil" attack, with three attacking from the starboard bow and two from the port bow, so that no matter which way *Ryujo* turned, she could not evade the torpedoes. (Although the new TBF Avengers were greatly superior to the TBD Devastators that had been slaughtered at Midway, they still carried the unreliable Mark 13 torpedo). Of three torpedoes that possibly hit the *Ryujo*, one actually exploded, and the damage would ultimately prove fatal. Of the three Torpedo 8 aircraft that could have launched the lethal torpedo, one was piloted by Bert Earnest, who had been awarded two Navy Crosses at Midway as the only one of six Midway-deployed Torpedo Eight Detachment TBFs to have survived (barely) the first attack on the Japanese carriers the morning of 4 June. *Ryujo* eventually succumbed to progressive flooding from the torpedo hit, but her loss could not be confirmed by naval intelligence until early 1943.

At 1602, *Enterprise* radar momentarily detected the first inbound Japanese strike at 88 miles. Both carriers began launching additional fighters until, by 1630, 53 Wildcats were in the air (all fighters had been held back for fleet defense). All 53 were on the same fighter-direction frequency. Another radar hit occurred at 1619 at 44 nautical miles, and Wildcats sighted the Japanese strike at 1629, which split into two groups. Radar at the time could only determine distance, not altitude. The Japanese came in at 16,000 feet. The Wildcats were all too low. Radio discipline immediately broke down, along with any hope of coherent radar fighter direction. Only about 10 Wildcats reached the Val dive bombers before they commenced their dives; a few more Wildcats followed the Vals down. The escorting Zeros were very effective at protecting the Japanese dive bombers.

Machinist Donald E. Runyon (an enlisted pilot in Fighter Squadron 6, on *Enterprise*) knocked down three Vals and a Zero, the high tally of the battle by any U.S. pilot. Machinist D. C. Barnes (also of VF-6) led a division of four Wildcats in a dive with the Val dive bombers, and Ensign R.A.M Dobb downed two, while one of the Wildcats was badly shot up by a good Val rear gunner. A number of other Vals were claimed shot down by other fighters; however, the combined claims of planes downed by fighters and shipboard anti-aircraft gunners significantly exceeded the number of Japanese planes involved.

Although radar had provided early warning, cloud formations obscured the Japanese approach and the air battle raging above. The first time shipboard anti-aircraft gunners saw the Japanese was at 1642, when they were directly overhead commencing their dives. The Japanese plan was to attack *Enterprise* with 18 Vals and *Saratoga* with nine Vals. It is not known with certainty how many Vals made it through the U.S. fighters, but most of them did, inflated claims notwithstanding. The Vals that intended to go for *Saratoga* were badly mauled and, in the end, all the surviving Val dive

bombers attacked the *Enterprise*. *Enterprise* anti-aircraft fire was now enhanced with significant numbers of new 20 mm Oerlikon guns and, as Japanese bombs fell, pieces and parts of the planes that dropped them fell too. The 20 mm couldn't knock down planes before they released their ordnance, but they took a devastating toll of those that did. Several bombs (and their disintegrating planes) were near misses, but the Japanese pilots were determined. The first bomb hit *Enterprise* at 1644 on the corner of the number three (aft) elevator and penetrated several decks into a petty officer's mess, killing 35 men. The second bomb hit the aft starboard 5-inch gun gallery, taking out the guns and killing almost all their crews; another 35 men were killed. At 1646, a third bomb hit just aft of the island, with a low-order detonation that resulted in one of the most famous photographs of the war, which caught the bomb at the instant of detonation, but which did not kill the photographer (or anyone else) as reported in many accounts. (A Navy photographer was killed, but by the second bomb in the gun gallery.)

About five Vals peeled off and attacked the new battleship *North Carolina* (BB-55), a big mistake. With 20 5-inch/38-caliber dual purpose guns, numerous quad 1.1-inch machine guns (still jam-prone), and dozens of new 20 mm guns, the *North Carolina* put up such an intense volume of fire that observers were convinced she was on fire, but she suffered only superficial damage from a near miss.

The first attack cost the Japanese 18 dive bombers (of 27) and six Zeros (including several planes that went down on the way back to their carriers) to obtain three hits, at a cost of eight defending Wildcats. *Enterprise's* damage control was superb. Despite the high casualties, the holes in the flight deck were quickly patched and, one hour after the attack, *Enterprise* began recovering aircraft. Then, *Enterprise* lost her steering, with her rudder jammed over to starboard. One of her two electric rudder motors shorted out after water

poured in when ventilation trunk was mistakenly opened remotely. The seven men in the compartment were overcome before they could switch to the alternate motor. As the second Japanese strike proceeded inbound, *Enterprise* was trapped steaming in a circle, unable to take any evasive action. Chief Machinist William A. Smith donned a self-contained breathing apparatus (which had been modified by another chief for extended endurance) and entered the compartment. Smith was twice overcome and had to be pulled out by other Sailors using a safety line. On his third attempt, at 1858, Smith succeeded in starting the alternate motor and *Enterprise* regained steering control. While *Enterprise* was circling and the second Japanese strike was 10 minutes out, in probably the luckiest U.S. break of the battle, the radio operator in the Japanese strike leader's plane miscopied a position report on the U.S. carriers and the strike changed course. The second Japanese strike never did find the U.S. carriers.

When the first Japanese strike was inbound and the fighters had been launched, the two U.S. carriers launched everything that could fly just to get them off the deck, which included some aircraft that were armed and ready for a follow-on strike and others that weren't. On *Saratoga*, pilots were in planes to move them around the deck when they were ordered to immediately launch, a number without their flight gear, and others without charts of any kind. The result of this was a number of uncoordinated groups of aircraft groping in increasing darkness trying to find any kind of Japanese targets. One group of *Enterprise* torpedo bombers commenced an attack only to discover the target was a reef. At 1735, a group of five *Saratoga* Torpedo 8 TBF Avengers (of which only squadron commander Lieutenant Harold H. "Swede" Larsen had his flight gear), which had joined up with two SBD dive bombers, located elements of the Japanese Advance Force battleships and cruisers. As at Midway, Torpedo 8 unhesitatingly pressed home their attack. Unlike Midway, none were shot down,

although two damaged aircraft had to ditch; their crews were eventually recovered. But like Midway, none of VT-8's torpedoes hit, or if they did, they didn't work. The two dive bombers attacked what they reported as the Japanese battleship *Mutsu*. The target was actually the seaplane carrier *Chitose*. Neither bomb was a direct hit, but several seaplanes caught fire and the *Chitose* sprung some severe leaks and developed a dangerous list, but made it back to Truk. As darkness fell, some U.S. aircraft recovered on Guadalcanal, and some succeeded in making night landings on the carriers. Japanese battleships attempted to close on the U.S. position to conduct a night attack on any damaged U.S. ships (and typically, Japanese aviators had claimed a number). Three Japanese destroyers did bombard Guadalcanal during the night (and several Marine aircraft attacked them at night, unsuccessfully). However, by midnight, both Nagumo and Fletcher decided they had had enough and, by daybreak, the two carrier forces were far apart steaming in opposite directions. Their respective caution would anger both Yamamoto and King; Nagumo would be given yet another chance; Fletcher would not.

### ***Actions on 25 August***

As a result of confused Japanese command and control, Rear Admiral Tanaka was still trying to get his convoy to Guadalcanal while the Japanese carriers, with his air cover (after *Ryujo* had sunk), were steaming in the opposite direction. After three days of successfully outwitting all attempts to attack him, Tanaka was dogged through the night by a radar-equipped PBY, and his luck ran out just after 0800 on 25 August, when five Marine and three Navy SBD dive bombers from Guadalcanal commenced an attack. Tanaka's flagship, the light cruiser *Jintsu*, was seriously damaged and Tanaka was initially knocked unconscious. The troop transport *Kinryu Maru* was hit and set on fire. One Marine pilot discovered that his bomb had not released and he turned back and conducted a solo attack on the Japanese force, with a near miss on another

transport. The destroyer *Mutsuki* went alongside the stricken *Kinryu Maru*. Three US Army Air Force B-17 bombers arrived overhead at 1027. Given the B-17's long track record of not hitting anything, *Mutsuki*'s skipper contemptuously refused to break away and maneuver. Although a skilled warship skipper could avoid bombs dropped by horizontal bombers, the ship had to actively take evasive action. As a result, *Mutsuki* took a direct hit and sank at 1140, taking 40 crewmen with her. Another Japanese destroyer sank the *Kinryu Maru* with a torpedo, and the rest of the convoy beat a hasty retreat, thus ending the battle.

The U.S. had achieved the strategic intent of stopping a Japanese reinforcement of Guadalcanal, although the 1,500 troops on the transports, by themselves, would not have made much difference, being greatly outnumbered by the Marines already on Guadalcanal. The Japanese also found alternate means to get troops ashore, with night-time runs aboard Japanese destroyers. The damaged *Enterprise* required repairs in Pearl Harbor, leaving only three operational U.S. carriers in the Pacific, which would quickly be whittled to one by Japanese submarines. U.S. shipboard anti-aircraft fire was greatly improved over the first battles of the war, but the U.S. was still struggling with how to make best use of radar in providing for fleet air defense.



*USS Wasp (CV-7) afire and sinking, south of San Cristobal Island, after being torpedoed by a Japanese submarine, 15 September 1942 (80-G-391481).*

## H-010-3: “Torpedo Junction”

*H-Gram 010, [Attachment 3](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
September 2017*

Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher’s decision on 9 August 1942 to relocate his three carriers—USS *Saratoga* (CV-3), USS *Enterprise* (CV-6), and USS *Wasp* (CV-7), newly arrived from the Atlantic—from the vicinity of Guadalcanal (thus depriving Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner’s transports and the Marines ashore on Guadalcanal of air cover) remains one of the most controversial decisions of

the war in the Pacific, and the subject of endless arguments ever since. Fletcher’s decision, however, was consistent with U.S. carrier doctrine developed in the pre-war years, which viewed aircraft carriers as a “hit-and-run” force, capitalizing on the speed and mobility of the ships. Exercises in which carriers remained tied to a fixed location in range of “enemy” land-based aircraft usually ended very badly for the aircraft carrier. Fletcher was deeply concerned about the threat from Japanese land-based aircraft and submarines (and counterattack by Japanese carriers) if he remained too closely tied to Guadalcanal for too long. Having already had two

carriers sunk from under him, *Lexington* (CV-2) at Coral Sea and *Yorktown* (CV-5) at Midway, Fletcher had a healthy respect for Japanese capability. Fletcher reasoned that Japanese bombers alone would not be able to dislodge the Marines from Guadalcanal, but if his carriers were lost, the battle for Guadalcanal would be lost as well.

The Allied landing on Guadalcanal on 7 August had caught the Japanese by surprise, so there were no Japanese submarines in the area, although numerous false alarms convinced U.S. Navy commanders that there were. Japanese bombers from Rabaul at the northern end of the Solomons reacted within a matter of hours, and flew to the area of Guadalcanal. Their top priority was the U.S. carriers that the Japanese had figured out had to be in the area, and only after failing to find the carriers in two raids on 7 August and another on 8 August did the bombers go for the transports off Guadalcanal (suffering heavy losses as the U.S. ships had warning the bombers were on the way). The 16 Japanese Betty torpedo bombers and 15 Zero fighters that sank the already damaged U.S. destroyer USS *Jarvis* (DD-393) with all 233 hands on 9 August (see H-Gram 009) were actually looking for the carriers. (In H-009, I forgot to mention that *Jarvis* shot down two of the bombers and damaged four more in her final fight.) Although the air threat was real, many have criticized Fletcher (including Rear Admiral Turner at the time, and CNO King, too, for being overly cautious). Although the Japanese land-based twin-engine Nell and Betty bombers could reach the U.S. carriers at extreme range, their fighter escort Zeros could only go as far as Guadalcanal itself—barely. With a narrow threat sector and no fighter escort, the Japanese bombers should have been quite vulnerable to U.S. carrier fighters with the advantage of radar warning. However, U.S. carrier fighter losses against Japanese fighters over Guadalcanal in the first two days had been significant and were of great concern to Fletcher. Although Japanese land-based bombers in the Solomons never did

find or attack U.S. carriers, the Japanese quickly rectified their initial lack of submarines in the area.

By the end of August 1942, nine Japanese submarines were patrolling the area south and southeast of Guadalcanal. Like the bombers, the primary targets of the Japanese submarines were the U.S. carriers. With the *Enterprise* out of action for repairs after the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, Fletcher still had three carriers with the arrival of the USS *Hornet* (CV-8) in the area. Although Fletcher had pulled his carriers out of the land-based air-threat, he was still operating near continuously in waters that quickly became infested with Japanese submarines, and on 31 August, his luck ran out, and his flagship, *Saratoga* (Captain Dewitt C. Ramsey, commanding—a future VCNO/CINCPACFLT) was hit by a torpedo for the second time in the war.

The Japanese submarine *I-26* (Commander Minoru Yokota, commanding) fired six torpedoes at the *Saratoga*. One torpedo hit, wounding 12, including Fletcher, who suffered a cut on the forehead. Initial damage was not severe, but *Saratoga* (and her lost sister, *Lexington*) had a unique turbo-electric power plant, and cascading power outages caused the ship at points to go dead in the water and it had to be towed. *Saratoga* would survive, but would be out of action for months. After *I-26* fired her torpedoes, she actually scraped hulls with the destroyer USS *Macdonough* (DD-351), but *Macdonough*'s depth charges were set too deep, and *I-26* escaped. (*I-26* also sank the first U.S. merchant ship of the war, just off California on 7 December 1941, and would later sink the light cruiser USS *Juneau* [CL-52] with the loss of almost all hands. *I-26* attacked and barely missed the U.S. escort carrier USS *Petrof Bay* [CVE-80] off Leyte on the night of 25–26 October 1944 and was sunk by either USS *Coolbaugh* [DE-217] or USS *Richard M. Rowell* [DE-403].) Fletcher returned to Pearl Harbor with the *Saratoga*, but never held another combat command, as both Admiral King and Admiral Nimitz had lost patience with him. (King had

wanted to relieve Fletcher after the Battle of Coral Sea, but Nimitz stuck with him, at least until September.)

Throughout the first two weeks of September 1942, the remaining two undamaged U.S. carriers, *Wasp* and *Hornet*, frequently operated southeast of Guadalcanal, providing cover to U.S. resupply efforts and to ferry aircraft reinforcements to Guadalcanal to replace high aircraft losses at Henderson Field. Submarine sightings were frequent, and on 6 September, both the *Hornet* and the new battleship *North Carolina* (BB-55) narrowly missed being hit by Japanese torpedoes. On 15 September, while providing air cover to transports carrying the 7th Marine Regiment to reinforce Guadalcanal, the U.S. luck ran out. Although U.S. carrier fighters shot down a Japanese Mavis long-range floatplane in the early morning, the Japanese were able to determine the carriers' location.

At 1445 on 15 September, the Japanese submarine *I-19* (Lieutenant Commander Takaichi Kinashi, commanding) fired six Type 95 torpedoes (smaller submarine-launched version of the Type 93 "Long Lance" oxygen torpedo) at the *Wasp* from 1,000 yards. At least two, possibly three, torpedoes, hit the *Wasp* while the other three travelled several miles into *Hornet's* screen. *Wasp* had just launched eight Wildcat fighters and 18 SDB Dauntless dive bombers (for ASW CAP). Unlike *Yorktown* (CV-5) at the Battle of Midway and *Enterprise* (CV-6) at Eastern Solomons, both of which had warning of inbound attack and had time to execute lessons from Coral Sea (such as draining fuel from aviation fuel lines and replacing with inert gas), *Wasp* was caught at an extremely vulnerable point while conducting flight operations. The result was similar to what happened to the Japanese carriers at Midway: a raging inferno with numerous secondary explosions, which killed many of the damage control team members. Captain Forrest P. Sherman (a future CNO) tried valiantly to save his ship (and would be awarded a Navy Cross and

Purple Heart for his efforts), maneuvering her so that smoke and flame would be blown clear and save as much of his crew as he could. However, it was not long before it became clear that the situation was hopeless.

At 1500, a massive explosion tore through the *Wasp*. The embarked task force commander, Rear Admiral Leigh Noyes, had his clothes set on fire, but was otherwise unhurt. The explosion was so extreme that Rear Admiral Norman Scott, embarked on heavy cruiser USS *San Francisco* (CA-38), assumed that Noyes had to be dead and assumed command of the task force (a correct decision anyway since Noyes had no capability to command from the crippled *Wasp*). By 1520, Captain Sherman was forced to order abandon ship. Of *Wasp's* crew of 2,247, 173 were killed and over 300 wounded. Still, the burning and abandoned carrier refused to sink, and had to be scuttled by three torpedoes from the destroyer USS *Landsdowne* (DD-486,) finally succumbing around 2100. All but one of *Wasp's* airborne aircraft were recovered by the *Hornet*, but 45 planes went down with the ship. Japanese submarine *I-15* observed *Wasp* sink, providing one of the few accurate Japanese battle-damage assessments of the war.

Meanwhile, the three torpedoes that went into *Hornet's* screen caused damage as well. The *North Carolina* was hit and damaged by a torpedo that hit forward, killing five, and causing the forward magazines to be flooded as a precaution. Despite a very large hole, the *North Carolina* demonstrated the toughness of the new U.S. battleship designs, and with superb damage control very quickly resumed making 25 knots. She nevertheless had to be withdrawn back to Pearl Harbor for two months of repair, which left only one new battleship (USS *Washington*—BB-56) in the South Pacific.

The destroyer USS *O'Brien* (DD-415) (Commander Thomas Burrowes, commanding) was hit in the bow by a torpedo, far enough forward that no



crewmembers were killed. Nevertheless, that damage was severe enough that the ship had to be withdrawn for repair. *O'Brien* had been specially modified with additional anti-aircraft weapons, and her later absence (along with *North Carolina*) would be a factor in the loss of *Hornet* at the Battle of Santa Cruz in late October. *O'Brien* was able to transit at 15 knots to Espiritu Santo for temporary repairs. Although certified as being capable of making the transit back to Pearl Harbor, the *O'Brien* began to break apart after her crew had sailed her for 2,800 miles, and she sank on 19 October. All of her crew were rescued.

Rear Admiral Leigh Noyes (who had relieved Fletcher as carrier task force commander) was heavily criticized as a result of the loss of *Wasp* (which left *Hornet* as the one operational U.S. carrier in the Pacific until *Enterprise* could complete repairs). Noyes was accused of having operated his carriers for too long in the same place, thereby facilitating the submarine attack. Later analysis, however, showed that Noyes had varied his location over a 300-nautical-mile area of operations, but there were just too many Japanese submarines and, as Fletcher had feared, keeping the carriers tied down near Guadalcanal put them at great risk. And like Fletcher, Noyes would not hold operational command again. (And, as an aside, when Nimitz chose Rear Admiral Raymond Spruance to command the *Enterprise/Hornet* task force at Midway on the recommendation of bedridden Vice Admiral Halsey, it was in the place of the next senior aviator, Noyes.)

## H-010-4: Samuel B. Roberts

*H-Gram 010, Attachment 4*

*Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC*

*September 2017*

On 27 September 1942, three companies (A, B, and D) of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines were landed by ten Higgins landing craft at a point west of the U.S. Marine forward lines on Guadalcanal that was supposed to be behind Japanese lines (1st Battalion, 7th Marines was under the command of the legendary Lieutenant Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller). The landing party itself was under the command of the battalion executive officer, Major Otho Rogers. The hastily conceived and planned operation was a debacle, as the Marines, without adequate pre-attack intelligence and hampered by tidal conditions, actually landed in the midst of a heavily fortified and dug-in Japanese position and quickly became pinned down. A Japanese air attack drove the USS *Monssen* (DD-436), which been providing gunfire support, further out to sea to maneuver. The landing beach was out of range to be supported by other elements of 1st Battalion and the 7th Marines engaged with Japanese forces along the Mantanikau River to the east. Major Rogers was killed almost immediately by a Japanese mortar round, and the Marines' radio was destroyed (some accounts say the Marines failed to bring a radio ashore, but I find it being destroyed to be more plausible). Sixty Marines were killed and over 100 were wounded in the battle, one of the bloodiest for the Marines in the entire Guadalcanal campaign. The greatly outnumbered landing party had to resort to tying white T-shirts together to spell out "help." The signal was spotted and reported by a Marine SBD Dauntless dive bomber. Lieutenant Colonel Puller personally boarded the *Monssen*, which led nine Higgins landing craft back to the beach to extract the Marines.

While *Monssen* provided gunfire support (after the Japanese air strike departed) that cleared a

way for the trapped Marines to reach the beach, the landing craft were met by intense Japanese fire. One of the landing craft, with U.S. Naval Reserve coxswain Samuel B. Roberts embarked, acted as a diversion to draw enemy fire as other landing craft extracted the Marines. Roberts had previously volunteered to provide a diversion if one became necessary. However, exactly what happened remains unclear. According to Navy reports and his award citation, Roberts was mortally wounded at the very end of the operation and died while being airlifted out, and was subsequently awarded a posthumous Navy Cross. However, according to U.S. Coast Guard records, Roberts was accompanied by Coast Guard Petty Officer Raymond J. Evans. (After Rear Admiral Turner had withdrawn Navy surface forces from the close proximity of Guadalcanal after the disastrous U.S. Navy defeat at the Battle of Savo Island, about two dozen Navy and Coast Guard Sailors, including Roberts and Evans, had volunteered to stay behind and operate several Higgins landing craft to move supplies along the Marine's beachhead on Guadalcanal.)

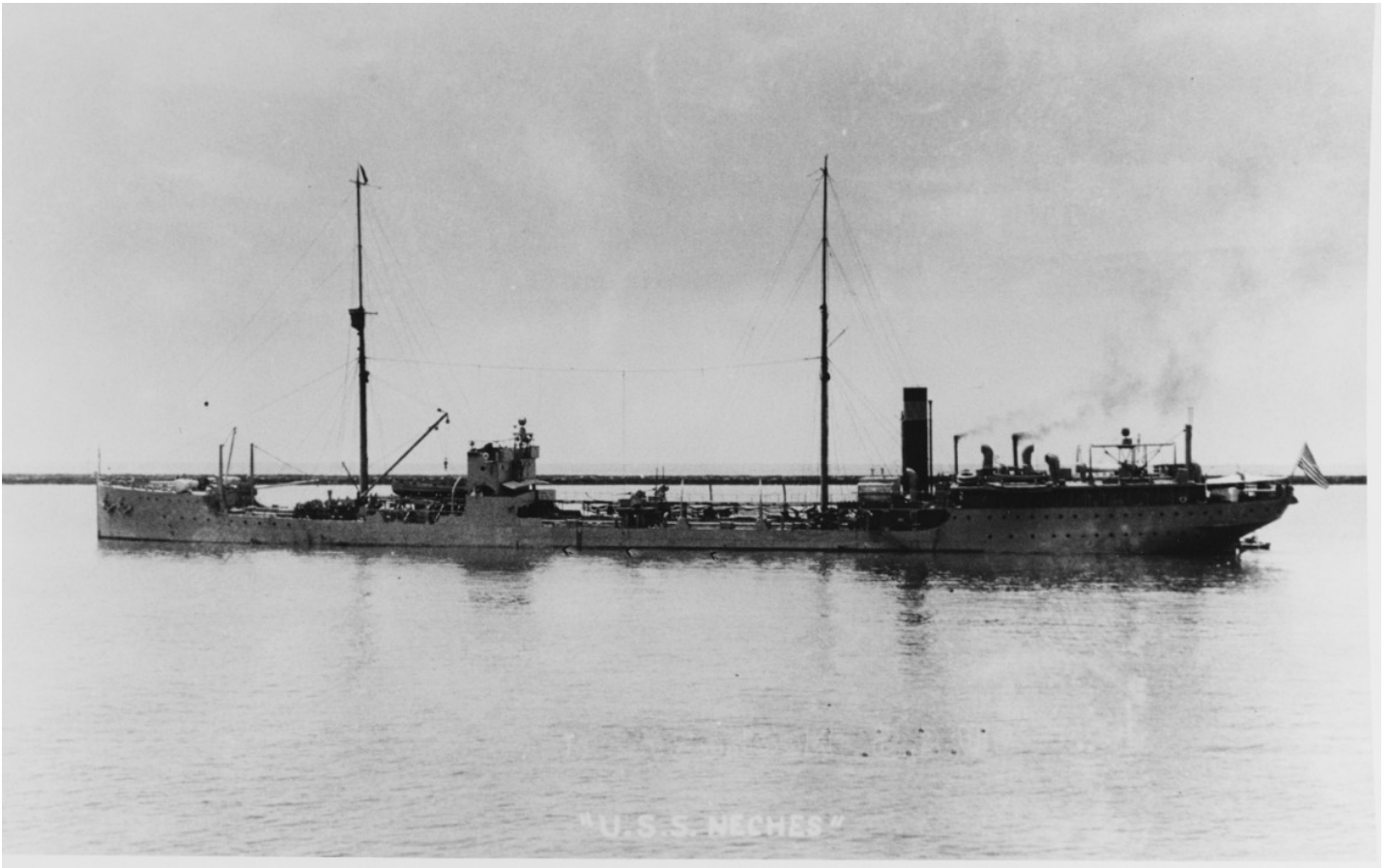
According to Evans's account, after Roberts and Evans initially dropped the Marines off and the other nine landing craft headed back to U.S. lines, Roberts and Evans remained close to the beach in the event any wounded Marines needed evacuation. Neither appreciated the range of Japanese machine guns from the beach and their boat came under fire. Evans returned fire while Roberts maneuvered the boat, attempting to draw fire as it became apparent that the Marines did need to be withdrawn. It was at this time that Roberts was hit in the head and throat by a burst of machine-gun fire. Evans took the damaged boat back to Lunga Point with the mortally wounded Roberts, but when the Marine's distress signal was reported, he took another boat back to the landing beach with U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer Douglas Munro, who, according to Coast Guard records, led the rescue effort while repeatedly maneuvering his boat to shield others. Munro was hit by a bullet and killed while trying to

tow the last landing craft that had grounded on the beach. His last words were, "Did they get off?" They did. Munro was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, the only Coast Guardsman to ever this award. At this point, there is no way of knowing which version is the most accurate. What is not in dispute is that in either version, Roberts voluntarily placed himself in a position of extreme danger and gave his life in support of brother Marines ashore.

(Based on my personal discussions with Captain Paul X. Rinn, Commanding Officer of USS *Samuel B. Roberts*[FFG-58]; on the book *No Higher Honor: Saving the USS Samuel B. Roberts in the Persian Gulf* by Bradley Peniston (especially for researching the U.S. Coast Guard version;) on Captain James Bloom's, research; and the book *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* by Richard B. Frank, which it is pretty definitive.)



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*USS Neches (AO-5), sunk by Japanese submarine I-72 off Pearl Harbor on 22 January 1942 (NH 68317).*

## H-010-6: Attacks on the U.S. Mainland in World War I and World War II

*H-Gram 010, [Attachment 6](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
September 2017*

### ***Japanese Actions in World War II***

Shortly after Pearl Harbor, seven Japanese submarines commenced operations off the West Coast of the United States, with intent to shell targets in California on Christmas Eve 1941. The operation was initially postponed to 27 December, and then cancelled by the Japanese for fear of U.S. retaliation on the Japanese homeland. Over the next year, Japanese subs contented themselves with sinking ten U.S.,

Canadian, and Mexican merchant ships, some within sight of the U.S. mainland. The Japanese I-25 also sank the Soviet submarine L-16 with all 50 hands (a big “oops” since the Soviet Union was at that time neutral in the war between Japan and the rest of the Allies). At the time, the L-16 was transferring from the Soviet Pacific Fleet to the Soviet Northern Fleet via the Panama Canal. A U.S. Navy chief photographer’s mate serving as an liaison officer was also lost aboard the Soviet sub.

On 23 February 1942, the Japanese submarine I-17 shelled the Ellwood Oil Field west of Santa Barbara, California, inflicting minor damage (but triggering an invasion scare on the U.S. West Coast, which served as additional pretext for interning Japanese-American U.S. citizens). It was followed on the night of 24-25 February by the “Battle of Los Angeles,” in which jittery American anti-aircraft gunners unleashed an intense barrage over the city at non-existent Japanese aircraft, an



action “extremely” loosely depicted in the Steven Spielberg/John Belushi movie *1941*. In the movie, the submarine that provoked the movie hysteria was the “*I-19*” which in reality was the floatplane-equipped Japanese submarine that sank the *USS Wasp* (CV-7) on 15 September 1942.

Before conducting her floatplane attack on Oregon, the *I-25* also shelled Fort Stevens, at the mouth of the Columbia River, on the night of 21–22 June, the only attack on a mainland U.S. military post during the war, which damaged some phone cables and a baseball backstop. U.S. shore gunners requested permission to open fire on the submarine, but were denied out of concern that doing so would give away number, position and capability of U.S. defenses prior to an actual invasion, thus depriving U.S. coastal artillery of their only opportunity to shoot at a real Japanese ship during the war. (Another Japanese submarine shelled a target in Canada, but all rounds missed.)

The Japanese submarine force was fixated on the idea that its purpose was to attack and whittle down the U.S. battle fleet in preparation for the decisive battle between the U.S. and Japanese battleships expected to occur in the western Pacific. The force never adapted to the idea of sinking merchant ships or auxiliaries (although the U.S. had an ample supply of fuel oil at Pearl Harbor—thanks to the Japanese failure to bomb the oil tanks during the raid on Pearl Harbor, oilers capable of refueling at sea were in very short supply). The sinking of the *USS Neches* (AO-5) by Japanese submarine *I-72* off Pearl Harbor on 22 January 1942 and the loss of *USS Neosho* (AO-23) by air attack at the Battle of the Coral Sea that May 1942 significantly impacted U.S. fleet operations. Japanese submarines would regularly bombard U.S. Marine positions on Guadalcanal and occasionally on other islands, but few would ever be considered effective attacks. *I-25* would be sunk by *USS Ellet* (DD-398) off the New Hebrides Islands on 3 September 1943.

Although the Japanese navy conducted no further shore bombardments of the U.S. mainland, between November 1944 and early 1945, in retaliation for the commencement of U.S. B-29 raids from the Marianas Islands in November 1944, the Japanese released over 9,000 balloons carrying incendiary devices (“fire bombs”) toward the United States, some launched from submarines, but most from the Japanese mainland itself, riding the Pacific jet stream. Approximately 300 are believed to have reached North America, causing a number of fires. Tight wartime censorship prevented the Japanese (or the American public) from getting any “BDA” on their balloon attacks. Six Americans were killed (a woman and five children) when one of the children found an unexploded device and disturbed it, setting off an explosion. These were the only confirmed deaths due to enemy action on the U.S. mainland during World War II. (The U.S. fire-bombing raid on Tokyo on the night of 9–10 March 1945 killed between 80,000 and 100,000 Japanese civilians.)

### ***German Actions in World War II***

Although German U-boats sank numerous Allied merchant ships just off the U.S. East Coast and Gulf of Mexico, they never opted to shell the U.S. mainland. The *U-507* did sink the tanker *Virginia* right in the mouth of the Mississippi River on 12 May 1942. Another German submarine did shell the American Standard Oil refinery on the Dutch Caribbean island of Aruba in early 1942. However, on 12 June 1942, the German submarine *U-202* landed a party of four agents at Amagansett, New York (Long Island), whose mission was to destroy power plants at Niagara Falls and several aluminum factories across the U.S. After landing, the team leader quickly turned himself in to the FBI and compromised the rest of the team, who were promptly arrested. On 17 June 1942, *U-584* landed a second team of four agents at Ponte Verde Beach (near Jacksonville), Florida, tasked to attack multiple targets in the U.S., including New York City’s water-supply



pipes. They were also compromised by the first team leader's defection. Although the teams had landed wearing military uniforms, they were captured in civilian clothes. All eight were tried by military tribunal; six were executed as spies, and two who had turned themselves in were given 30-year sentences before being deported to Germany in 1948.

On 29 November 1944, the Germans tried again with much the same result. *U-1230* landed two agents at Hancock Point, Maine, with intent to gather intelligence. One soon turned himself into the FBI, resulting in the other's capture. Both were sentenced to death, but the sentences were commuted.

### ***German Actions in World War I***

The most damaging attacks on the U.S. mainland by a foreign power (not counting the War of 1812 and the American Revolution) were actually carried out during World War I by a German sabotage ring. On 30 July 1916, the major munitions storage depot and loading facility at Black Tom Island in Jersey City, New Jersey, exploded with a massive blast felt for a hundred miles, blowing out most of the windows in lower Manhattan, damaging the Statue of Liberty (the stair to the torch has been closed ever since), killing at least four people, and injuring hundreds as 2,000,000 pounds of small arms and artillery ammunition and 100,000 pounds of TNT detonated, all destined for Russia. At that time, the United States was officially neutral, but U.S. businesses were happily selling arms and ammunition to anyone who would buy them, although the British Royal Navy's blockade of Germany meant that in reality almost all the U.S.-manufactured arms and ammunition were going to the Allies. The German government repeatedly objected to this one-way trade, to no avail.

The initial investigation pinned the blame for the Black Tom Blast on a Slovak immigrant (who later served in the U.S. Army after the U.S. entered the

war), who had delivered a suitcase that triggered the blast; however, he was mostly an unwitting agent of a German sabotage ring. Subsequent investigation by the Office Naval Intelligence (which had counter-espionage as a primary mission at the time) revealed one of the most incredibly complex spy and sabotage rings in history. The details go beyond the scope of this paper, but are worthy of a Le Carré novel, and included Germans, Communists, Mexicans, the Irish anti-British Clan na Gael group, the Indian anti-British Ghadar Party (mostly Sikhs,) and other gun-running mercenaries, mostly operating out of San Francisco. (The break-up of an arms-smuggling effort by elements of this group resulted in the most sensational and highly publicized trial of the day, sometimes referred to as the "Hindu-German Plot.") A key member of the ring was a German naval officer, Lieutenant Lothar Witzke. At the start of World War I, Witzke was an officer aboard the German light cruiser *SMS Dresden*, which after running amok for several months in the Pacific, was eventually trapped in some islands off Chile (the British flagrantly violated Chilean neutrality in the process). The *Dresden* subsequently scuttled herself and her crew was interned in Chile for the duration of the war. Witzke, however, escaped from Chile on a merchant ship, which he jumped in San Francisco, where he eventually met up with the master German spy Kurt Jahnke. The two were primarily responsible for several espionage and sabotage events, including the Black Tom blast.

After the U.S. entered the war, Jahnke relocated to Mexico, but with Witzke conducted another spectacular sabotage attack in the United States, when, on the morning of 9 July 1917, a massive blast rocked the Mare Island Shipyard and numerous barges filled with munitions, killing six, wounding 31, and causing damage across a wide area of northern San Francisco Bay. Witzke would eventually be caught and imprisoned before being pardoned by President Calvin Coolidge (and sent back to Germany, where he served the

Third Reich with as much zeal as Imperial Germany). Jahnke also served Nazi Germany, and he and his wife were both captured and executed by the Soviets in April 1945. Although the munitions that Jahnke and Witzke had blown up at Black Tom had been destined for Czarist Russia (which subsequently sued the U.S. government for lax security that enabled the blast), the Soviets weren't any more forgiving than the Czar.



*Lieutenant William C. Fitzgerald, shown here as a midshipman (NHHC).*



*Lieutenant Vincent R. Capodanno, February 1966 (L38-12.12.01).*

## H-010-7: "Today in Naval History: 7 August 1967—50th Anniversary"

**Captain James Bloom, MC, USN (Ret.)**

*H-Gram 010, [Attachment 7](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
September 2017*

### ***Lieutenant William C. Fitzgerald***

One of the early U.S. Navy efforts in Vietnam was the assignment of military advisors to the South Vietnamese navy. At the start, active duty U.S. sailors serving as advisors shunned direct combat, but as the war intensified they were inevitably drawn into the whirlwind. Following his

graduation from the Academy and initial tour aboard the destroyer *Charles H. Roan* (DD-853), William Charles Fitzgerald volunteered for duty as such an advisor. He was posted to the South Vietnamese Navy's Coastal Defense Patrol Group 16, one of many coastal groups operating armed junks in surveillance and arms interdiction missions. By 1967, Lieutenant Fitzgerald had risen to the senior advisor position for the group.

In the pre-dawn hours this day, Group 16's operating base 70 miles south of Da Nang came under surprise attack by two Viet Cong battalions. The assault was overwhelming; in a matter of minutes enemy troops penetrated the minefield at the northern edge of the base and threatened the entire facility. Fitzgerald and his three junior advisors took shelter in a bunker at the center of the compound, from whence Fitzgerald radioed for help. His call was answered by *PCF-20*, a U.S. swift boat patrolling nearby, but in the 20 minutes

it took her to respond, 300 Viet Cong broke through the perimeter wire.

Fitzgerald's men returned a steady fire. *PCF-20* was shortly joined by *PCF-75* in company with the South Vietnamese navy gunboat *PCE-10*. But despite the combined fire of the three boats, the VC closed on Fitzgerald's position. Recognizing his position was about to be overrun, Fitzgerald ordered Lieutenant Junior Grade Anthony C. Williams, Chief Engineman Harold H. Guinn and Boatswains Mate First Class Leo E. Pearman to evacuate to the nearby riverbank. The lieutenant stayed behind to cover their retreat. When all three were clear, Fitzgerald called an artillery strike directly onto his position, then jumped to make good his own escape. He didn't make it.

U.S. support now arrived in force, in the form of more swift boats, the destroyer *Camp* (DER-251), and an Air Force C-47 "dragon ship." These maintained unrelenting counterfire for several hours while friendly troops were evacuated. Three companies of U.S. and South Vietnamese infantry arrived later in the day to reclaim the base. Fourteen South Vietnamese sailors had been killed and 35 wounded in the attack. Williams, Guinn, and Pearman all received shrapnel wounds, but survived. Fitzgerald was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for his bravery and sacrifice. Our current Pacific Fleet *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer *Fitzgerald* (DDG-62) remembers this gallant Vermont native, as does Fitzgerald Hall at the Naval War College.

### ***Chaplain Vincent R. Capodanno***

On 3 September 1967, Lieutenant Vincent R. Capodanno, CHC, USNR, made his usual Sunday rounds hopping supply choppers to celebrate mass with the dispersed units of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division. Capodanno had been with the 5th Marines since 30 April, volunteering to serve a second tour in Vietnam. This day found his Marines engaging the enemy in Operation Swift, an effort to clear the area

around Da Nang. He ended his Sunday rounds with Mike Company. However, the helicopters transporting Mike to the central command area were forced down short of their destination by enemy ground fire.

Monday morning dawned with Mike Company and their hitchhiking chaplain trudging on foot through the enemy-held Que Son Valley. Shortly, snipers opened on the group, forcing Capodanno and the command platoon to ground in a shell crater while the 1st and 2nd platoons deployed in defense. It quickly appeared they had actually confronted a large enemy concentration that now announced its presence with a barrage of mortars. The advanced platoons became pinned down and began taking casualties. Sensitive to their cries, Capodanno jumped from the crater and began ministering to the dying and wounded. Lance Corporal Lovejoy, the radio operator, fell pinned in the dirt by enemy crossfire. Capodanno ran to his side, grabbed the strap of his pack and dragged him to safety at the top of a hill. The Marines fired tear gas canisters into the bush; however, several had lost their gas masks in the initial panic. Father Capodanno selflessly gave up his own, stating, "You need this more than I do."

After attending seven fallen Marines, a mortar round landed within 20 meters of Capodanno, knocking him to the ground and ripping away part of his hand. Ignoring his wounds, he ran to the side of Sergeant Manfra, who had been hit five times and knocked senseless in an exposed position. Again braving direct enemy fire, Capodanno pulled him to the shelter of a nearby depression and began bandaging his wounds. Meanwhile, outside the defensive perimeter, Lance Corporal Tanke was holding pressure on the thigh artery of Hospital Corpsman Leal, who lay mortally wounded. Nearby, Tanke observed an NVA machine gun being set up, but his rifle jammed in counter-firing. Observing the same gun now ready to open, Capodanno ran to the position and dove over the corpsman, cradling him with his body. It was in this position that

Capodanno's body was later found, having received 27 bullet wounds.

Lieutenant Capodanno is the second Navy chaplain to receive the Medal of Honor. Camp Pendleton's Capodanno Memorial Chapel and our former *Knox*-class frigate *Capodanno* (FFG-1093) honor him.